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OR,
**A DESPERATE WOMAN'S
DESPERATE GAME.**

BY JACKSON KNOX,
(OLD HAWK.)

AUTHOR OF "HAWK HERON, THE FALCON DETEC-
TIVE," "THE CIRCUS DETECTIVE," "OLD
GRIP," "THE HARBOR DETECTIVE,"
"DEAD-ARM BRANDT," "THE
HURRICANE DETECTIVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

RANKLING, BUT NOT MORTAL.

A YOUNG woman had come to a sudden and
astounded pause in the center of one of the
drawing-rooms of a spacious and stately New
York residence.

She was about twenty-two or twenty-three,
of a superb type of brunette beauty, and Nature
had molded her nobly statuesque form in one
of her most generous moods.

This was a critical morning in the heart his-
tory of this beautiful young woman, whose
name was Avie Hollister.

HE CERTAINLY SUGGESTED THE EXPERT AS HE STOOD THERE IN THE BROAD HALL.

It was Decoration Day, and she was fresh from an early and solitary visit to Woodlawn Cemetery, for the purpose of laying her floral memento on the grave of an only brother, who had died, when she was little more than a child, of an old and incurable wound received in the War of the Rebellion.

Her hat was in her hand, just as she had hastily taken it off at the instant of being thus strangely arrested in her movements. The mantle of her light, tasteful summer costume had been thrown open and back, half-off the shoulders, to the fuller revelation of her exquisite figure. The attractive arrangement of her abundant dark hair—so richly and deeply brown as to be almost black—was charmingly flustered a bit at neck and brow from the healthful exercise, which had also called up the soft flush that was still lingering in the lovely cheeks.

Still lingering, but only as a last flash of sunset upon a twilight cloud that fades, vanishes and is gone almost before we can have realized its roseate charm—never more to return with the same delicate meaning or passionate suggestiveness—lost forever in the gray pallor of the approaching night, which then gathers down over the world so swiftly and remorselessly as the sudden pall of emotional ruin and despair upon the human heart.

In an instant the flush of that sweet face had faded no less completely and irrevocably; and, as she remained rooted there, listening with her soul in her ears, as you might have thought, the light also went out of her glorious eyes, leaving them hard and stern, and a slow, agonized species of petrification seemed coming over her.

Voices in low converse had reached her from an adjoining conservatory, and it was to what she had caught of their utterance that was due the momentous change of heart and nature that was now at work in this peerless creature.

With a slight shiver, she at length burst the spell, and stepped mechanically to a rich green and gold *portiere* that draped the arched entrance to the conservatory.

After an instant's hesitation, during which the murmur of the voices continued, she noiselessly parted the folds, and looked within.

A love scene, for which she had been sufficiently prepared, was disclosed to the eyes that had grown so hard and stern.

A stalwart fair young man, but two or three years her own senior, was leaning with his back against a porphyry fount, his arms gently encircling the *petite*, softly rounded figure of a young woman, who was looking up lovingly, and yet half-doubtfully into the clear manful gray eyes that were gazing down earnestly and enjoyably into hers. The young man was Avicé Hollister's second cousin, Jack Sterling, heretofore generally regarded as her lover and betrothed; indeed, the latter relation had been a sort of family understanding between them almost from their infancy, though accompanied by passionate attachment, until perhaps this cruel revelation, solely upon her part, blindly as she might have refused to recognize the fact. The young woman who was thus surprised, though in secret, in the first real love-passage of her life, was Miss Hollister's seamstress, Bertha Forrest. She was of about Avicé's own age, or perhaps a year or two younger. Neither very dark nor very fair, and but moderately pretty, but with soft light brown hair, tender hazel eyes, and a sweet seriousness of expression, Bertha Forrest was invested with that subtle and indescribable charm which, for want of a better, is mostly characterized by the vague term, "a nameless attractiveness."

There was yet a lingering of newness and timidity in their embrace.

"You shall not leave me, dearest," the young man was saying, softly, "until I see that look of doubt pass wholly away from your dear face—until I know that your love for me is no less absolute and trusting than the love I give to you."

"But it still seems so strange, so unreal, Mr. Sterling! Not only had I thought you genuinely engaged to Miss Hollister—"

"A fad of her uncle's," impatiently, "to design us for one another from the very first—one of those imported monstrosities, *une affaire de convenance*!"

"But, you seemed to return her love?"

"After a fashion, and only then until I saw you."

"But, if you had not met me?"

"I acknowledge that then my love might have developed into something like a fit return of the passionateness with which she seems to have come to regard me as her rightful due, for Avicé's beauty is little short of bewitching, her character magnetic, her accomplishments—"

"While the same qualities are absolutely wanting in me!"

"Do not dare to say that again—to me! My darling, I love you, love you, love you! Is not all contained in that?"

"Not quite all, dear friend," with downcast eyes and renewed blushes. "Miss Hollister is, moreover, so rich, while I am so poor—a mere needlewoman!"

"And just the one dear woman of my heart! And are you poorer than I shall be when my uncle shall throw me forth, as he surely will?"

"Oh, that is it!" with a sort of terror. "It will be the ruin of your prospects in life, dear!"

"Nonsense!" brightly; "the making of them, rather. Listen, Bertha! I have long been struggling to be something else and better than a mere banker's clerk. I am a writer."

"A writer?"

"Yes; and already with some measure of success. Some of my productions, both prose and verse, have already been published, and not unremuneratively either. With time, necessity, and your dear love, to spur me on, I shall yet make a success of it."

"But, this is very surprising!"

"Of course it is! But I shall no longer care whether my uncle suspects the truth or not. No more of this, my love, my life! Tell me once again that you love me!"

"Oh, how can I help telling you that? But—"

"No more 'buts'!" he had been steadily drawing her closer and closer, until now she was folded strainingly to his breast. "Bertha, my darling, you have not kissed me back yet, of your own impulse and inclination?"

The sweet face was suffused with embarrassing blushes, but the quivering lips were at last upturned to his as he bent toward them.

But Avicé had seen and heard enough.

"Bless me, miss!" exclaimed Dorton, her English maid, a moment later when Avicé was entering her apartment; "how you must have loved the poor gentleman, your brother. You look just awful!"

"Do I?" with a strange laugh. "But, you are right, Dorton. My brother was dear to me—quite"—(he had died when she was eight years old)—"and this morning's visit to his grave, perhaps together with the heat of the day, may have overtaken me a bit. Do not let me be disturbed, Dorton."

She entered the boudoir, locked the door, and strode mechanically to her mirror.

Yes; Dorton had not exaggerated. There was a change, and *awful* was the word for it.

Avicé Hollister tore off her mantle, her dress, her shoes.

Then for hours she was lying, face downward, on her bed, in such dull, voiceless agony of despair as to resemble a species of trance, but without a sob and without a tear.

When she arose, the youthful beauty of her face was no longer marred by emotional suffering, and yet its stunned, hopeless air of our first acquaintance had given place to something yet more terrible, because more marked, and wholly indescribable.

It was a despair that could smile, laugh, and be merry on occasion; an iced fury that would not let the volcano forth save at the bidding of her soul; a collectedness of malevolent forces in which the intellect was everything, the emotional nature nothing.

The transformation seemed something of a marvel, even to herself, for she pressed her hand to her heart in a wondering way, as if half-doubtful of her continued existence in this terrible phase.

What! had it stopped beating? Ah, no—not pulseless, not quite lifeless yet, perhaps, and yet so dead, so dead!

Then she stepped to the mirror.

A moment's inspection of the image which it presented so glowingly, so unalteredly lovely, perhaps, to all eyes save her own, and then she smiled—a smile such as had never parted the bright lips of Avicé Hollister before, and whose interior terribleness, like that strange death-in-life at heart, was for evermore, she was pleased to believe, her individual secret, impenetrable and secure.

She unlocked the door and touched her call-bell.

"Ho, miss!" exclaimed Dorton, with her accustomed enthusiasm, as soon as she entered in response to the summons; "w'at a blessing is a short but hinvigoratin' cat-nap! Now you are your hown beautiful self again!"

"Glad to hear it, I am sure. Dress me for luncheon, if you please, Dorton. There will be company, I suppose?"

"Honly Mr. Sterling, as husual on 'olidays, miss, and that 'andsome Mr. Baylis, your huncle's private secretary, I believe."

At the mention of the last name Avicé's eyes gave a quick, intelligent sparkle.

A few minutes later she descended the stairs in one of her most exquisite toilettes.

CHAPTER II.

AN INTERESTING HOUSEHOLD.

MR. HENRY HOLLISTER'S city residence was a commodious but not pretentious brick double house in lower Fifth avenue, one of whose chief external attractions was a considerable garden at the rear—considerable so far as house-gardens in lower fashionable New York go—which was overlooked by a broad, cozy first-floor veranda, mostly well shaded and cool on the hottest days, and therefore a favorite lounging place.

Hearing the gentlemen's voices on the veranda, Avicé at once proceeded thither, dawning among them like the vision of semi-tropical loveliness that she always presented, and with her

flashing smile for one and all in response to their several greetings.

But she gave a start of well-simulated surprise at perceiving her needlewoman occupying a modest little nook in the angle of the porch and the conservatory, which extended back from the south wing for a matter of fifty feet.

"Why, Bertha Forrest!" she exclaimed, going up to the girl and kissing her gently, while taking away the needlework with an impatient but kindly movement; "have you forgotten this is a holiday? I won't have you slave for me on holidays, my dear."

"I could scarcely afford to take one, Miss Hollister, though you are very kind," replied Bertha—who had rather unwillingly (perhaps a little guiltily) submitted to the salute, though managing to smile in her modest, half-serious way. "Besides," brightly, "I found time to carry my wreath for my father's grave long before I had my breakfast."

"Ah, yes; your father was in the ranks. I now remember your having said something of it."

"He was an officer," gently corrected the young workwoman, "and fell at the head of his regiment at Gettysburg." [Avicé's brother Ralph had only been a captain by brevet.] "Shan't I have my sewing back, miss?"

"Not on a holiday!" with kindly peremptoriness. "I shall afford one for you, if you can't for yourself. Run along now, my dear, and enjoy yourself as best you may."

As Bertha submissively obeyed, going down the piazza steps and then around them, in order to reach the basement passageway, Avicé noted with secret satisfaction that, while her cousin Jack Sterling but guardedly followed the vanishing soft figure with his eyes, young Baylis did so without reserve and with an ardent significance that there was no mistaking.

"A modest, worthy young woman that, apparently!" observed Mr. Hollister, leading the way into luncheon a moment later, the dining-room being directly in from the piazza. "But, I don't understand her working out in this way, if her father was a colonel when he fell. She has no mother or brother or sister, I believe, and the pension should support her pretty decently."

Jack Sterling had it on the tip of his tongue to explain, perhaps with no little warmth, but prudently closed his lips, when Baylis quickly took up the theme.

"Miss Forrest," he said, "devotes the entire pension to a paralytic aunt, who brought her up, and is now an inmate of the Hospital for the Incurables. She once told me so." And he seemed so proud of the slight confidence that Jack, who did not like him too well, looked somewhat glum.

"Humph!" remarked Mr. Hollister, skillfully flaking off the cold joint, slice by slice, for distribution at the hands of Maggy McMann, the demurely pretty parlor and table maid, who stood expectantly at his right; "rather an unusual instance of self-denial, I must say. By the way, where is Mrs. Marjoram?"

"She is on an excursion with her nephew, the detective," replied Avicé.

Mrs. Marjoram was Mr. Hollister's old-time housekeeper.

"Ha, ha, ha!" he chuckled, settling down at last to helping himself. "I had forgotten. He, he, he! An odd rogue, that same nephew of Mrs. Marjoram. You remember what tricks he helped to cut up hereabouts and at Craggsby when you were youngsters, Jack?"

"I should say so," was the reply.

"And even then, whenever we played at thief catching, Rod was ever the detective by a sort of natural privilege."

"And you the thief, eh? Ha, ha, ha! Hardly strange it should be the ruling passion with him at an older growth, eh? And, they do say, the young fellow is already an ornament to his profession, too."

"So I have heard, Uncle Hal, and I've never wonder at his progress either. He had shrewdness and reticence and perseverance enough, to start with."

"I say, Jack."

"Well, uncle?"

"Why not give young Joram, as I believe they mostly call him, a show to hunt up that missing heirloom you were to give Avicé as a bridal present? Or, would you prefer to wait till the knot is actually tied? Avicé, my dear, there is no need for such an excess of blushes, you little jade!"

Avicé was not blushing in the least—Uncle Hal's sight being none of the best, which occasionally led him to take much for granted, rather than forego a supposed joke anent the dilatoriness of the young couple, whose ultimate marriage had long been the apple of his eye—and, as her cousin had looked a little uneasy, she hastened to respond for him.

"Nonsense, uncle!" she cried, good-naturedly. "Couples who have already waited a dozen years or more for the fulfillment of an engagement—contracted for them, not by them, and in their childhood at that—need not be in any hurry now, and the lost heirloom can afford to remain a mystery until they are."

"Well, I suppose so," grumbled the old gen-

tleman. "But, it was a rare trinket, that which disappeared so strangely. And, as for you two being still in no hurry, my dears, you must remember that perhaps I have less patience in the matter than yourselves. Baylis, my boy, try that walnut sauce with your meat, and you'll find those slices particularly excellent."

Then, being much of a gourmand, he fell to discussing what was before him exclusively, with occasional advice to his secretary of a dietary nature.

Avice, in the mean time, kept up a playfully bantering chat with Jack, who was really grateful for her coming to his rescue as she had done; and she also had an occasional glance for even so humble a cipher as Maggy, the waitress, whose admiration for the secretary—of which he seemed to be perfectly oblivious—had long been too unsophisticated to be much of a secret to any one else.

Mr. Henry Hollister was an old retired business man of immense fortune. Though virtually retired this many a day—he was hard on to three-score, with a good chance for an additional score if he would abandon his high living, which he wouldn't—he was still a director and stockholder in many corporations. Thus his abstention from active business was more quasi than real, since he still retained an office down-town, and managed to find employment for the special clerk and secretary, to whom the reader has been introduced, in the mere management of his great estate. A childless widower, he had taken Avice to his breast at a tender age. At the death in battle of her brother, shortly previous to her adoption, she was the sole orphaned child of an only and rather ne'er-do-well younger brother, to whom, however, Mr. Hollister had been tenderly attached. Since the girl's coming of age, he had constituted her his sole heir, and from the very first she had been little less than the idol of his heart. In temper, Mr. Hollister could be irascible at times, though for the most part he was kindly, indulgent and easy-going. In reputation, he was beyond reproach. And in habits, he preferred his home to his club, which is saying enough; though perhaps without his French cook, who was a treasure, though a high-priced one, and his stock of wines, which left nothing to desire, the commendation would have had to be qualified.

Jack Sterling had come under the old gentleman's protection in much the same way as Avice, though at a less early age and under not quite so exceptionally flattering auspices. He was the son of a favorite first cousin and old college chum of Mr. Hollister's, who, after years of slaving in an ill-paid professorship, had died a widower, leaving his only child, this same Jack, then a boy of ten, to his old friend's care, with nothing to his name but the small book-collection of a studious life, and a single heirloom, the only one that had remained out of the wreck of the small fortune that had come to him with his wife. The old merchant had given the boy a home, an excellent education, all the affection he could spare from his worship for his niece, and Jack was now a clerk at a good salary in the bank of which his patron was a director and the largest stockholder. But, the old gentleman had quickly come to love the boy. Hence his wish that the young couple should eventually marry, and the tacit understanding for their future to that end when both were no more than children.

This desire had gradually become the ruling one of the merchant's life, and, as he felt the increase of years, his impatience for its fulfillment was greater, though for the most part repressed, than perhaps either of the young persons had an adequate idea of.

Both felt, however, his purpose to be so set in this regard as to entail the bitterest visitation of his anger, even to the extent of disinheriting, upon the one who might venture to rebel against it, or bring the engagement to naught.

As to the real state of the case between the girl and the youth, thus arbitrarily promised to each other, the reader has already had a sufficient insight as a preliminary. On Avice's part, her love had accompanied the edict, growing with her years, until finally becoming the master hope of her life, the idolon of her maiden dreams. Jack's steadfast admiration for his beautiful cousin, on the other hand, had never blossomed into a true and worthy reciprocation of such a passion, though it might have done so save for the fate that had interposed Bertha Forrest between them.

In fact, Avice had waited heroically, self-denyingly for that blossoming, which the consciousness of her superlative charms readily enough assured her must sooner or later be her reward; and her secret sufferings over his comparative indifference were altogether beyond his conception, though, until he had met Bertha, and his heart was no longer in his keeping, he had, perhaps without suspecting the profundity of an attachment so unwittingly inspired, hardly doubted that they would ultimately marry, and be fairly blissful, to the old gentleman's fullest satisfaction, and the enjoyment of his pots of money between them, to which Avice's unchanged heirship would open the road.

Then had come to Avice the astounding and hideous revelation of the truth, with which our story opened, and which, with that tragic deadness of heart that had ensued, was already working a baleful revolution in her nature, whose ruinous outcome it would have been well if she could foresee, howsoever vaguely.

Tom Baylis, Mr. Hollister's secretary, was a perfectly worthy, well-meaning young Englishman, who had known and loved Miss Forrest for several years, and it was at his instance that she had found almost constant employment and generous kindness with Avice Hollister for the past twelvemonth or so.

As for Jack Sterling's heirloom, which has been alluded to, it was a very handsome diamond bracelet of an unique pattern, which had belonged to his mother, who had come of a once prominent and wealthy, but long since hopelessly impoverished, Virginia family. It had unaccountably disappeared from among the young man's effects several months previous to the opening of our story. Frequent and exhaustive searches had failed to find any trace of the missing jewel, though Jack, on his own part, persisted in the hope and belief that it was rather mislaid than stolen, and might yet come to light as strangely as it had vanished.

Such was the "situation" at the outset of the strange and complicated life-drama with whose varied though intimately connected unfolding scenes we are to occupy ourselves to the close.

Lunch being disposed of, Jack Sterling was the first to rise from the table, with the announcement of an afternoon's engagement at his club.

"There's a concert to-night at the Casino, Jack," said Avice, indifferently.

"Are you really desirous of going, Avice?" he hesitated.

"Oh, by no means," she replied, though making more out of his hesitation than he could guess. "There will like enough be company drop in this evening, too. I hadn't thought of that."

Jack then sauntered away untrammelled, while Mr. Hollister, after lighting his cigar on the piazza, thought he might catch a game of whist at a neighbor's.

"It's left for you to amuse Avice, Baylis" he called out to the secretary when going. "And be sure you remain for dinner."

Avice looked at her remaining companion with a peculiar smile, which, somehow, made him uncomfortable, without knowing the reason why.

"You shall accompany me on a long drive, Mr. Baylis," she said, in her sweet voice. "How does that command strike you?"

Of course, he could only say he was delighted, and, a few moments later, the drive was under way.

CHAPTER III.

"THE HEART THAT IS DEAD MUST NEEDS BE PITILESS."

AVICE HOLLISTER'S superb brunette beauty always caused a distinct sensation on the fashionable New York drives, and the man was deemed highly fortunate who could sit beside her in the Hollister Victoria, drawn by the splendid high-stepping bays that were a little fortune in themselves.

Her warm, sensuous beauty, so youthful and yet so ripe, so thoughtful and yet so animated, was like a perpetual vision of tropical color and northern breeziness in a delicious, a dreamy, and yet an invigorating combination.

"Ah! either a fair Italian, a Spaniard, or a South American, it is quite manifest," would perhaps be the comment of one promiscuous enjoyer of the visual treat for the first time. "She is a wonder!"

"You must be out there," another might say in correction. "Sicily, or the south of Ireland can alone have engendered that magnificent brunette."

"Gentlemen, you are both right and both wrong," a third and wiser might observe. "The beauty of the Victoria is assuredly incomparable—a feast for the eyes—but she is simply rich old Hal Hollister's heiress-niece, a thorough-paced United States American girl from way back in the Indian-fighting ancestry, and with only such chance admixture as must go to form that mosaic of races which must ultimately evolve the flower of mankind. But she is a dazler, and no mistake, and the young fellow at her side ought to be prouder of his privilege than any prince in Christendom."

But upon this Decoration Day afternoon one of those observant spirits that invisibly consort with mortals so constantly and so intimately, who, even more than the poor themselves, are so perpetually with us, might, upon overhearing such various comments as the foregoing, have said concernedly, though unheard:

"In one vital regard you are equally mistaken, my friends. So ravishingly beautiful up to a certain and fateful hour of to-day, that young woman is no longer so. Her heart is dead—the mere galvanized corpse of a heart—and the envenomed steel of evil has passed into her soul, which shall hereafter neither pity nor feel. Hence her divine beauty is a mere mask, whose spiritual essence is no more."

But it was little that Avice Hollister had ever cared for the encomiums of mortals, or the criticisms of invisibles, and she was now chatting with her companion so gayly and so brilliantly that he was still more puzzled to know why he wasn't in the seventh heaven of bliss, instead of experiencing such internal anxiety and discomfort, which was really the state of his case.

But he was not long to remain in ignorance on this vexatious point.

"My friend," said Avice, at last, some little time after they had entered Central Park by one of the eastern gates, "I have a notion for some wild-flowers, and there ought to be plenty of them in the solitary glades up here above the great reservoir."

They accordingly alighted, and were soon strolling through the comparatively secluded quarter she had alluded to.

Once alone, however, in a particularly solitary walk, Avice said, abruptly:

"Let us occupy this bench, Mr. Baylis. I really care nothing for wild-flowers—not to-day, at least—but wish to converse with you confidentially."

Her companion obeyed, though becomingly surprised, and notwithstanding that he had flattered himself on being sufficiently conversant with the capriciousness of American young ladies by this time.

"I am going to be perfectly frank with you, my friend," Avice smilingly continued, "for you can be of use to me."

"I am only too happy, Miss Hollister," he murmured, disquietedly.

"Don't say what you don't mean. You are in love with Bertha Forrest, and my cousin, Jack Sterling, who is also in love with her, or imagines that he is, is bent upon taking her from you."

Young Mr. Baylis was, naturally, more astonished than ever, and he also began to account for his heretofore unaccountable disquiet in Miss Hollister's society, which ought to have delectated him so extravagantly.

"It—it is true, ma'm," he blurted out. "That is, it is true that I love Miss Forrest."

"And it is no less true what I have said of Mr. Sterling's intentions. You won't venture to tell me that you have had no suspicion of them?"

"Well, I don't know—that is—perhaps— But, really, Miss Hollister, this is a strange subject, you know, for me to discuss with a young lady like you."

"I am not a young lady at present, but a jealous woman." With a peculiarly mocking smile as she emphasized the adjective. "And I don't purpose discussing anything, but merely to tell you what to do. Now, answer my question in full."

The young Englishman's embarrassment vanished, at least in part, for there was a tinge of contemptuous imperiousness in her tone that stung what pugnacity he possessed to the surface.

"I have noticed of late that Sterling likes Bertha," he replied, a little savagely. "But, what of it? Little good will it do him, you know."

"I know nothing of the sort, and neither do you. And Bertha returns his love, or imagines that she does."

"I don't believe it!"

"It is true. Listen: I opine that you are in no mood to resign your love, especially if there is a possibility of winning her back to you."

"I won't give her up while there is a ghost of a chance for me. I'd die first!"

"That is well. And, I am equally resolved to save Mr. Sterling from his infatuation; for he is my betrothed, as you must know, and I, moreover, love him so greatly!" With a repetition of her peculiar smile.

"Oh, yes, yes, yes!" exclaimed Baylis, miserably. "It is all very—very sad, and twisted, and mixed up!"

"Till we right the affair between us. I have determined that this shall chiefly be accomplished through your instrumentality, and without unnecessary delay."

He stared at her a little stupidly (surely this extraordinary young woman was capping the climax to his heretofore mystifying experience with American young ladies), but she calmly went on.

"You must recover your sweetheart, and I must disenchant my fiancé of his infatuation. That is the point, and both ends shall be attained at a single bold stroke. You must abduct the pretty marplot—carry her off!"

He fairly jumped in his seat, staring at her bewilderedly.

"I beg your pardon, Miss Hollister," he stammered, "but—I am compelled to rudeness—what do you take me for?"

"You can obtain a vacation by merely asking for it," she serenely continued, wholly ignoring his words. "Then I can readily furnish you with the means for abducting the young woman, together with a retreat where Jack will not be able to follow her, and you can have her all to yourself."

"But, really, Miss Hollister," indignantly, "if you suppose me capable—"

"Back of Craggsby, my uncle's country place near Tarrytown, there is an old stone house occupied by an old negro couple. They are absolutely devoted to me, though this, together with their very existence, is a secret of my own. A capital retreat for Miss Forrest's rustication! Good air, pure water, wild scenery, solitude, milk, eggs, and sweet butter, to say nothing of all fruits in season, *galore*. That part is decided. You may need money, and it shall be forthcoming. As for the actual abduction, anywhere hereabouts in the Park would answer (Bertha lives in the vicinity, and has told me of her penchant for solitary rambles, morning and evening, and Blakelock, our coachman is the veriest slave to my command, besides being thoroughly discreet). But, as regards this initial part of the programme, we must confer elsewhere and again."

She had gone on in a hurried but quite coherent, business-like way that had fairly taken away her listener's breath; but, there was good fiber in him, and he had by this time recovered a good share of his self-possession.

"Excuse me, miss," he said, coldly, and at the same time rising, "but I shall have to say good-day to you!"

"You will do nothing of the sort," still serenely, but with only a half-smile now. "You will resume your seat at once, and in less than five minutes agree unreservedly to everything I have planned—or, rather, commanded."

"Oh, will I, though?" flushing.

"Yes."

"And why, pray?"

"Because you are in my power."

"It cannot be—" indignantly, and yet with a preliminary start. "Miss Hollister, I cannot but think you have taken leave of your senses."

"A passing misapprehension on your part, Mr. Baylis!"

"Again permit me to ask, what do you take me for?"

"For what you are—a felon, a fugitive from English justice!"

No longer any mystery as to his in whom instinctive disquietude in that beautiful girl's presence.

Baylis turned deadly pale, and dropped back into his seat, trembling visibly.

He rested his forehead on his hand, with a heroic effort at self-composure.

"What do you know?" he at length asked, in a hollow voice, without looking up.

Her brilliant eyes had slightly softened, his misery was so pitiable, but it was only for an instant.

"I know this," she replied: "Before seeking this country, four years ago, you were in a responsible position in Huddersfield, an English manufacturing town. You were also a lover of the race-course and the betting-book—what Englishman is not? In a moment of weakness, you appropriated a hundred pounds of your employer's money to bet upon a racing event, lost the money, and fled. Had you remained, and confessed your fault, it would have been forgiven. But, your flight rendered your employers implacable. The felony was made public, together with the announcement that, if caught in England, your prosecution would follow. You became no less a fugitive than a proscribed man. In America your life has been blameless, and you have now the redeeming chance of your life with my uncle. A word from me would ruin you. Trust me, obey me, and it shall never be spoken."

He had by this time recovered his self-control, and was looking at her wonderingly, as if half-doubtful of the reality of her youth and beauty in connection with this detestable role.

"How did you know this?" he asked.

"I decline to tell you."

"Convince me," very slowly, and after a long pause—"convince me that Mr. Sterling is really earnestly endeavoring to mislead Bertha Forrest from the protection of my love, and I will accede to your wishes. Otherwise, I shall defy you."

"Nothing could be fairer than that. You heard me hint of the Casino concert to my cousin, and his implied excuse for not taking me?"

"Yes."

"It was because he had already invited Miss Forrest to accompany him. I feel certain of this. Go you there, also, this evening, and observe. At nine o'clock come to me. We shall then decide as to particulars."

He slowly bowed his assent, and once more arose.

"Pray, permit me to leave you, Miss Hollister," he said, in a sad voice. "I—I would like to go off alone for a little while."

She gravely nodded, and he went away so abjectly and dispiritedly that once again the dangerous softening came into her dark eyes, though repressed as instantly as before.

"Pshaw!" she muttered, clinching her gloved hand and rising in her turn; "the heart that is dead must needs be pitiless!" And she composedly retraced the path toward the spot where she had left the Victoria in waiting.

CHAPTER IV. WOMAN'S WIT.

MR. HOLLISTER grumbled a good deal at dinner because young Baylis had not kept his

promise to remain, notwithstanding the excuses that Avice made for him.

The consequence was that the elaborate repast—all repasts were elaborate and more or less perfect at Mr. Hollister's—was partaken of solely by Avice, himself and Mrs. Marjoram, the housekeeper, no guest other than the missing one having been invited, and Jack being almost as little counted on for dinner as for lunch, though making his home with his uncle from his boyhood.

However, Mrs. Marjoram, who had long been regarded as a family member, and whose influence with the old merchant was not inconsiderable, was sprightly company at all times, and her visit to her nephew detective's family had put her in the best of spirits.

"Look here, Mr. Hollister," she cried at last—the merchant's worthy housekeeper and he had been girl and boy together, and her breezy and familiar manner of address was never thought of as anything but her natural privilege—"I took the liberty of speaking to my neevy, the detective, to-day about Mr. Jack's missing heirloom."

"Humph!" and the old gentleman looked up interestedly. "Well, perhaps Jack himself might consider it a liberty somewhat unwarranted, Mrs. Marjoram, but since you have taken it, there's no need of finding fault with you now."

"Just what I thought to myself when I took it," composedly. "But, don't you find this *ragout*, with its croquette outworks, a little intricate, not to say over-seasoned?"

"By no means," a little snappishly, for Mr. Hollister would never hear a word against his costly chef. "But, one's taste for curry must be seriously cultivated. It's greatness, like that of *pate de foi gras*, is not born or thrust into one, but must be achieved."

"Oh, of course, but, give me a little plain cooking, now and then, for a change. At my neevy, the detective's, to-day—a twelve o'clock dinner, of course—we had regular old-fashioned corned beef and cabbage, with pork and beans accompaniments, which brought back to my mind the old-time wash-days of my grandmother till the tears rushed into my eyes as fast as the dear old vitals could rush into my mouth."

Avice laughed, while Mr. Hollister made a wry face, though he almost immediately added:

"But you haven't told us, my dear woman, what Rod said about the missing bracelet."

"Neither I did. La, me! the recollection of that corned beef and cabbage must have knocked my intellects endwise. Well, he thought awhile—my neevy, the detective, always thinks awhile before he speaks—and then said all he would require would be to make a thorough examination of Mr. Jack's room to come to a decision as to whether the trinket had been stolen, as most of us think, or only mislaid or lost, as Mr. Jack thinks. And I believe it, too. There's no longer or deeper head on the force than my neevy, the detective; though it is sad to learn of his being mostly known as 'Joram,' or 'Three-fingered Joram,' among his associates!"

"Oh, I wouldn't mind that," said Mr. Hollister, already brightening up genially over his second glass of port. "Nothing uncomplimentary, you know; Joram being good old Saxon for a tall tankard of spiced ale and toast—Gad! not a bad winter's night-cap, I should say—while the chap is minus a finger, as we must confess. And I really must give Jack another nudge as to your nephew taking a squint at that bracelet mystery."

The detective's words, as reported by his doating aunt, had set Avice to thinking.

If he was so confident of arriving at a decision by a mere examination of her cousin's apartment, why might not she do the same?

And, simultaneously with this thought, came the darker one:

Bertha Forrest's abduction must have the air of an elopement; and why not have her seem a robber as well?

Dinner at an end, she lost no time in playing for her uncle a series of dreamy airs, of a tested somniferous effect, in connection with the port he had absorbed and his post-prandial cigar, and with the speedy satisfaction of packing him off to bed.

She then accorded Dorton her liberty for the evening, saw Mrs. Marjoram snugly ensconced over her newspaper in her little first-floor apartment, and then, having the second-floor to herself, she entered Jack Sterling's apartment, lighted the gas, and took a survey of the situation.

It was by no means her first visit, she having made free to enter her cousin's quarters hundreds of times before through long familiarity.

They were not far from her own, and consisted of a handsome room with a connecting sleeping alcove, from which it was separated by a rich *portiere*.

She stepped to the dressing-case, and laid her hand upon a polished rosewood toilette-case. It was on top of this toilette-case, as she remembered—for there was not an inmate of the house who had not more or less anxiously assisted him in the fruitless search from time to time—that Jack had last recollected to have seen the jeweled heirloom lying previous to its mysterious dis-

appearance. And Avice had shared in his opinion that the trinket was less likely to have been stolen than to have accidentally rolled away into some as yet undiscovered nook or cranny.

With her hand on the box, she therefore looked once more, as she had done before, though never with quite the same eagerness as now, over the carpet and around in the corners and under the furniture, in a vain conjecture as to how the ornament might have fallen to the floor—by a sudden jar, for instance—and in which direction it might have subsequently rolled.

After fruitlessly puzzling over the matter for several moments, it suddenly occurred to her to explore the interior of the case, especially as it was a long time since she had taken the liberty, and she knew that Jack was in the habit of keeping some of his letters, ball-invitations, and other society papers there.

The case proved to be locked, and the key was gone. However, the lock was a trivial affair, and she had no trouble in pushing back its tiny bolt with an old-fashioned ornamental hairpin, which she had carelessly stuck in her *coiffure* before quitting her dressing room, and now thought of utilizing for this purpose.

This was done with thoughtlessness and total lack of hesitation, which, under ordinary circumstances, would have wholly divested the act of even an impropriety, in view of the long familiarity which had existed between the doer and her cousin.

But now—well, the case was somewhat different, she was compelled to confess to herself, but it did not deter her in the least.

Inside the case there was a litter of unimportant papers, together with a bundle of letters.

The latter she eagerly seized, but the missives proved to be her own, written to her cousin when he was on a far-western tour, but little more than a year previous.

Avice's brow darkened. Happy days, before she had come between their plighted lives!

Then there was a photograph—only one—and that of herself when she was sweet sixteen.

There was a passing vision. How well she remembered his kissing the picture first, at the time of her giving it to him, and her own li s afterward, with his merry, careless mouth—his mustache was such a dear, comically incipient sprouting then—and the big ring-headed hairpin he had given her in return!

Why, this was it now in her hand, chance-seized—the very pin!

The happy vision was gone, and she was back with the darker, the less innocent present.

A sudden thought seized her.

The broad, flat hoop forming the hairpin's head, if twice the circumference, would have answered for a bracelet, and was it not a hoop bracelet that was missing?

She wrenched off the ring, set it on the edge of the case-lid, and, by a smart, jarring blow on the dressing-case, displaced it.

The ring dropped to the floor, and sped, rolling away, finally disappearing under a low book-case, whose bottom was very slightly elevated above the carpet by its short corner legs.

Being naturally strong, she had the book-case out from the wall in an instant.

The ring was partly sticking out of a narrow cranny between the base-board and the flooring edge.

As she dislodged it thence she felt that there was something else behind it.

A nimble application of her delicate fingertips, and this, too, was brought to light.

Eureka! joy! it was the diamond bracelet, the missing heirloom!

CHAPTER V.

STEP BY STEP.

BY nine o'clock she was back in the drawing-room, to keep her appointment with young Mr. Baylis.

He was commendably punctual, and, moreover, in addition to seeming satisfactorily preoccupied and disturbed, greeted her with a complacency, not to say eagerness, which was all she could desire.

"I have been to the Casino, and seen enough," he said, briefly. "Miss Hollister, I am at your service in the affair."

She smiled. What a happy inspiration, that of hers, that Cousin Jack Sterling, sly Jack, would take Bertha to the concert at the Casino! However, she only said, with becoming seriousness:

"I am glad you have come to agree with me in this, Mr. Baylis. Let us strike hands on it," extending hers. "It is in accordance with dramatic rules, is it not, that conspirators should strike hands?" with her flashing smile.

His hesitation was barely perceptible as he took her beautiful jeweled hand, with a cold bow, to relinquish it instantly.

"To the details of our scheme, then," she continued, as they settled themselves to facing each other in a luxurious face to face chair.

"Pardon me, Miss Hollister, for so trifling a correction," he interposed. "But it is wholly *your* scheme."

She with difficulty abstained from biting her lip, for the lingering simplicity—some might

have called it the lingering honor—of this young Mr. Baylis was beginning to make her hate him.

"As you will," she went on. "To begin with, then, your elopement with Miss Forrest I have fixed upon for the day after to-morrow—the early morning will be the best time, when she takes her stroll in the Park, so, of course, the appointed time will be subject to the caprices of the weather, which fortunately, however, promises a long spell of set-fair."

"My elopement!"

"As a matter of course, it must so appear."

"I hadn't thought," slowly, "of being known in the affair in that way."

"Wholly indispensable, Mr. Baylis."

"As you will then, Miss Hollister," after a slight pause.

"That point is then settled: The morning after to-morrow morning, should Miss Forrest not be deterred from her accustomed stroll."

"So be it. But, why not to-morrow morning? allow me to ask."

"Because—well, you see, the girl is on the last of my summer gowns, and I do not care to have her usefulness interrupted."

The studied heartlessness of the answer—the more imperious one of, "Because I command it so," had been on the tip of her tongue—struck him harshly, but he only bowed his submission.

"You know Miss Forrest's residence?" she continued—"East Ninety-eighth street, near the Park?"

He again bowed.

"You will meet our close carriage by day-break at the Nineteenth street gate, and be on the watch, John will have his instructions. Of course you will choose your own opportunity for seizing or entrapping the girl. Chloroform had better be provided, in case of an emergency, and then—"

"Where am I to carry her to?" broke in the young man, with an abruptness that was almost brutal.

"John will have his instructions," she went on, without heeding his discourtesy. "It will be a somewhat lengthy drive—straight to Tarrytown by the boulevard and river road, and thence to the house I alluded to. Its inmates will be expecting you. It will be a charmingly secluded asylum, and I have been concerned to perceive Miss Forrest appear nervous and over-worked of late. It will, moreover, be a secure one."

"What"—he interrupted, much as before: that is, half-furiously, when she checked him with a swift, imperious gesture.

"Don't attempt that tone with me again," she said, dryly. "I don't like it, and when I chance not to like a thing, it is not well for the offender."

"What am I to do with Bertha when I get her caged?" he asked, self-correctingly.

Miss Hollister vouchsafed to appear surprised, not to say playful.

"What a question!" with a slight elevation of the brows. "Why, you love the girl, you told me?"

"I should say I do—yes, to madness!"

"Well, your chances for urging your suit are not likely to be interrupted."

"And do you think her spiritless enough to listen to me, or to treat me with anything but contempt, after I shall have so basely and treacherously entrapped her?"

"Pshaw! and do you think I care a straw what she will do after the entrapping, or you either, for that matter? Try to avoid an excess of sentiment, that may so readily become mawkish, my friend. Your lookout is to effect the girl's disappearance. I believe I have no further instructions for you. But stay; will you need money at the outset?"

He had risen with his accustomed bow of submission.

"Neither at the outset nor at any other time, Miss Hollister," he answered with cold respectfulness. "Though a poor man, I may be compelled to do a dis—to perform a shady act, but not paid for it."

"It is just as well," indifferently. "Of course, nearly the entire expense of the affair will have been arranged by me beforehand. I can depend on you in this?" rising.

"Absolutely."

He barely touched the carelessly-extended hand, and was gone.

Avice's low, broad brow darkened a little.

"Neither a fool nor a knave, that same Mr. Baylis!" she commented to herself. "Time was when his chivalric scrupulousness might have pleased me not a little, but now—"

She gave a half-frightened start. "Time was," yes, and how brief a space back! A sense of unreality came over her. Could it be that from a period of the morning of that same day, not yet wholly lapsed into the vague death-in-life of a yesterday—from that revelation in the conservatory, she could have advanced so rapidly, step by step, into plotting baseness and duplicity? It seemed like a dream—but no! She had but to wonderingly press her hand to her breast again to be assured of the fatal deadness within, and then she was her new self once more. Or rather, she was Hate's and Jealousy's and Despair's!

It was still not late, and on passing to the stairs she was surprised to perceive Maggy, the parlor maid, coming along the hall from the direction of the rear drawing-room.

In this connection, the thought of the girl's unsophisticated predilection for the secretary flashed upon her.

"You have not been listening?" she exclaimed, fiercely grasping the girl's wrist.

"Listening!" echoed Maggy, in consternation. "And to what, miss? I'm this minute from the kitchen to see if the street door do be fastened at Mr. Jones, the footman's, request."

Avice sternly studied her face, and then let her go, with a good-natured laugh.

"Uncle Hal," Avice asked at breakfast next morning, "when shall we go up the river for the season?"

"As soon as you say so, my dear," was the reply, "though I hadn't thought of fixing a day as yet. But a blistering summer is predicted, and I sha'n't be sorry to be settled at Craggsby. Why do you ask?"

"For nothing in particular, uncle; only the country must be growing lovely by this time. I shall run up there this afternoon to speak to the care-takers, if you think best."

"Good idea! Baylis will doubtless be also thinking of his vacation before long. So stir up things just as soon as you like, Avvy. I shouldn't object if we should make the move before the end of the week."

"And I shall have to wait a month yet!" observed Jack, with a sigh. "Shall our first flying trip from Craggsby together be for Saratoga or the White Sulphur, Avice?"

"Too far ahead to decide," she replied, with a laugh. "Some novelty may have sprung up in the way of watering-places by a month hence."

"Will you want me to accompany you to Craggsby to-day, Avice?" asked Mrs. Marjoram.

"No, aunty"—Avice had addressed the good woman thus endearingly from her earliest recollections. "I sort of feel like a solitary traveler to-day."

"Look you, my dears!" Mr. Hollister suddenly announced, looking up from his repast with one of his rare abruptnesses which had come to be sufficiently significant. "You might as well make it the set business of one of the flying trips then, first as last. For the matter has got to be formally settled this summer, thoroughly settled, understand that!" And he looked at both his young relatives with a sternness that was not his wont.

"Oh, ah, yes! why, my dear uncle, how brusque you are!" stammered Jack, burying his nose in his coffee-cup.

"Dear old nunksey!" laughed Avice, though herself a little more startled than ordinarily at the broaching of the time-worn subject; "is death already staring you in your hearty old face, that Cousin Jack and I cannot take our time?"

"Time enough! What have you been taking for the past five years? But you've due warning now, both of you, you lazy rogues, that my patience is running out."

And, still grumbling, Mr. Hollister took himself off with his newspapers.

"Lal and I don't wonder at it either," exclaimed Mrs. Marjoram, looking barteringly from one to another of the tardy pair. "Why, bless my stars! you're twenty-three at your next birthday, Avice, if a day, and I'm sure Cousin Jack there will never again see his twenty-sixth. Are you out of your heads, my dears, or is it possible you can't appreciate the bliss in store for you?"

"Don't rake up the back years, aunty, there's a good soul!" laughed Jack, a little nervously, it is true, and steadily avoiding Avice's eyes while concernedly occupying himself with his coffee and final roll. "My cousin might like it less than I. And as for the governor's impatience—well, now, I rather think we can still venture to take our own time."

Avice had been looking at him thoughtfully, a little wonderingly. Why did she want him—was still so resolved on having him, when the love that had been his was slain, when the heart, which had so hungered for the least manna crumb out of the laughing heaven of his kindly indifference, was perished in her breast? Let it not be forgotten that in the strange but delicious complexity of womanhood, pride, with its obstinate and tenacious grasp, is never absent, and that the imagination may retain its idol, or rather the shadow of its idol, even long after the substance or blissful reality thereof may have become a dead, lifeless and contemned image at the fireless altar of the emotions.

"Of course we can, Jack!" she hastened to observe, in her light, bright way that had so long been her mask. "But, tell me before you effect your matutinal disappearance, if I can have the use of your room for to-day."

"Why of course you can, Avvy? What a question!" Then a little curiously, as he rose: "But, what on earth can you want with it, coz?"

"For Miss Forrest to sew in," carelessly. "Dorton will be doing a lot of cleaning up in my own rooms, and it is too windy on the piazza for Bertha to-day."

"Oh, by all means!" And, still keeping his

secret under watch and ward, Jack strolled away.

Fortune seemed to favor Avice's developing plot.

On going to Bertha, a little later on, in Jack's room, where the unsuspecting young needle woman had been duly installed at her work, the latter suddenly looked up in no little anxiety and vexation.

"Oh, Miss Hollister!" she exclaimed; "it is too bad. I have forgotten to bring with me the braid for this last *challie* waist; it is lying on my dressing-table at home. How stupid of me!"

It was such an opportunity as could only have come thus fortuitously of itself.

"Oh, dear!" replied Avice; "and of course you mustn't spare the time to go back for it, this being your last day on those cheap summer dresses. But, wait a bit. I am just going for my morning drive, and can call for the braid myself. Give me the exact address and your room-key."

"Oh, miss! but the neighborhood isn't the nicest, and—"

"Nonsense!" with her kindly peremptoriness; "do as I tell you. Am I going to have you put back in my summer toggery for such a trifle?"

Bertha gave the address—No. —, East Ninety-eighth street, third floor front—and handed her the key.

"You'll have the braid before lunch time," said Avice, bustlingly, "and in the mean time you can finish the alteration on that lawn skirt. I suppose you still take your early morning strolls in the Park?"

"Oh, yes, miss!" brightly; "rain or shine, and I could hardly do without them now. This morning was particularly lovely, with such a sunrise as one doesn't soon forget."

"Ta-ta, my dear! One must needs have a reward for even getting out of bed at such an unconscionable hour."

CHAPTER VI.

"THE DEVIL'S DREAM."

It was a nice enough neighborhood in which Bertha Forrest had made her humble home, and clean enough, only it was very new, there seeming to be fresh tenements going up on every hand, while those already inhabited seemed to have only had their plaster dried for but a short time.

On entering the cheap but scrupulously tidy little suite of rooms, three in number, to which Bertha had given her the key, Avice cast a surprised and not pleased look around her. She half-consciously resented the instantly evident air of refinement that chastened and even beautified the cheapness and even insufficiency of everything that met her gaze.

It was the tiny front or sitting-room of the suite that she had entered. It being a corner house, both narrow windows, prettily curtained on the inside with inexpensive lace, over soft, creamy-hued blinds, afforded fine prospects, especially the one at the side, which looked up the transverse street and over sundry vacant lots, to the bowing foliage of the Park boundary, but two short blocks away. There was a sweet virginal air about the painted pine dressing-case; the books on the diminutive center-table—chiefly of poetry, besides a family Bible of venerable suggestions—denoted a cultured and pure taste; the carpet, though a mere patch, was a patch of artistic sunshine; and even the pictures on the walls, mostly engravings, were works of genuine art. Of the latter, there were two that were not engravings, and these were half life-sized colored photographs. One was of a singularly noble and soldierly man, in the full uniform of a colonel of infantry—doubtless the young woman's father, "dead on the field of honor." The other was of a motherly old lady, with an expression of mingled resignation and suffering, under which, on a prettily ornamental card, was clearly written in French the words: *Ma bonne Tante chérie—pareillement ma Mère*—"My beloved good aunt—not the less my mother." This, then, was the kindly mother-aunt to whose subsistence and nursing at the Hospital for the Incurables the devoted needle-woman applied the war-pension that would have kept her in comfortable respectability.

The brow of Avice Hollister darkened afresh; and she abruptly turned her observation to the adjoining apartment. This was the bedchamber, with its purely draped cot, upon which the forgotten trimming was lying, its modest wardrobe, its one little chair, and the old-fashioned hair-trunk, doubtless with its host of tender, no less than pathetic home associations, at the foot of the couch. And, through the open door beyond was the toy-like kitchen interior, with its gas-stove, its cozy cupboard, and its few but sufficient utensils, scoured and polished to the last degree of shining spotlessness.

But the intruder had naught to do with these objects, modestly suggestive and attractive as they might be in their way.

Having secured the braid, she was the next instant bending over the trunk, which proved to be unfastened, and she raised the lid.

It was comparatively empty, but in a little compartment of the upper tray there was visible an object which would have effectively

steered Avice Hollister to the end of the evil course which she had so boldly and fearlessly entered upon.

It was a small photograph of Jack Sterling, from the same negative that she herself had been carelessly presented with a copy six weeks or two months before, thus showing that the young man had begun his active attentions to Bertha much longer before than she, Avice, had supposed.

So she, the proud beauty and petted heiress, had been their dupe, or rather the dupe of her own passionate blindness for all that time!

Her lips tightened, her eyes blazed. She could have spat upon the picture!

However, she contented herself with discovering another and apparently seldom-used compartment at the bottom of the trunk, wherein she hastily left certain mementoes of her revenge, and was then prepared to go.

But there was no perceptible change in the smiling good-nature with which Avice Hollister laid the forgotten braid in her needlewoman's lap, half an hour later on.

She returned to her own apartments somewhat hurriedly, however, and it was also with some feverish impatience with which she tore up that counterpart photo of Jack Sterling in her possession into little bits.

"Has any one called, Dorton?" she asked, when her maid appeared.

"Only a few, miss," and Dorton pointed to several visiting-cards which she had deposited upon her young mistress's dressing-case.

"Ah, and of no importance," carelessly looking them over. "Well, you shall accompany me for a run up to Craggsby this afternoon, Dorton."

The trip was duly accomplished, and Avice was on hand to compliment Miss Forrest upon the completion of the summer wear when the latter was 'picking-up' to go home.

"Shall you want me for the remainder of the week, miss?" inquired the needlewoman.

"Why not? It is already a Wednesday, and there will doubtless be enough for you to do till we quit the city. Shall you want any more money in the mean time?"

"Oh, no, miss; there is but a trifle due me, as you must remember."

"Good-evening then, my dear."

"Good-evening, miss."

But, Avice could not find it in her dissimulation to bestow the parting kiss this time, and Bertha—whose conscience was not wholly undisturbed on her own part—did not take the omission to heart.

Jack was not present at dinner, which was not an unusual thing, and Mr. Hollister was called away by an engagement shortly after it was over.

Not long after this, when Avice was amusing herself with extracting a dreamy air or two from the piano, she heard her cousin's voice in the hall, together with another one not altogether unfamiliar to her ear in the past, and she stepped to the door.

As she did so Jack said, "Avvy, here is my old friend, Rod Marjoram," and at the same time a very remarkable-looking young man stepped up to her, and smilingly spoke for himself.

"You're long a stranger, Mr. Marjoram," Avice genially remarked upon giving the newcomer her hand; though from her earliest recollections she had rather tolerated than liked her cousin Jack's old-time school and playmate, who might almost have been designated as his foster-brother, they had been so inseparable, with Aunt Marjoram, the privileged housekeeper by no means backward in nursing the boyish intimacy.

But, whatever Rod Marjoram may have been and appeared as a boy, he had unquestionably developed into an odd-looking genius as "my neevy, the detective," or, as he was becoming rather extensively known in his vocation, as "Three-fingered Joram, the Expert."

He certainly suggested the Expert as he stood there in the broad hall, exchanging common-places with Avice and Jack, and the left hand in which he held his hat was noticeable for being minus its forefinger.

He was tall and slender, with the suppleness of an eel, and moved with a sinuous motion indicative of extraordinary agility and irresistible strength.

He was dressed completely in black, and his clothes were so close-fitting as to add to the impression of the man's suppleness and wiry nature.

His rather small head rested atop his slender neck, which the exaggerated standing collar could not modify, like a hairy and clinched fist atop the upraised forearm of a prize-fighter.

His eyes were as sparkling and scintillant as those of a weasel, giving to his resolute yet kindly face a singularly intense, searching expression as of a person always on the alert.

He wore neither beard nor mustache, and his short, straight, shining black hair gave one the impression of something of the East Indian in his blood.

You felt, in studying this man, that you stood in the presence of a mind and soul reader.

"Oh, no, we're not making a call on you, coz—at least, not just now," Jack at last explained,

as Avice stepped to one side of the drawing-room doorway, in which she had been standing, with a movement that might be construed into an invitation. "You see"—he hesitated—"Rod and I met by accident, when it occurred to me to mention that missing heirloom business, and—"

"Don't be ashamed at being forced into Rod's detective if not protective arms at last Jack," she interrupted, with a laugh. "Will I be in the way?"

"Not a bit of it, my dear."

She curiously followed them up-stairs—in fact, with far more and a far different curiosity than either of the young men could have any thought of.

It also struck Avice as an odd coincidence that it was about the same hour, almost to a minute, as that of her own amateur investigation of the preceding evening.

Joram stood in the center of the room, after Jack had lighted up, and silently listened to everything further he had to say, his round little head rolling this way and that atop his bean-pole of a form, while his glinting eyes seemed to take note of every detail of his surroundings with microscopic accuracy.

Still, and notwithstanding what she knew of old of his acuteness, Avice was perfectly at ease with regard to her own secret in the premises.

"Oh, it's all right, Jack," said the Detective Expert, a little impatiently, at last—and a very soft, bubbling sort of a voice he had, that seemed in keeping with the serpentine or eely suggestiveness of his outward personality. "If the article is lost, and not stolen, I'll have it for you. How big around was it?"

"Oh, say eight or nine inches in circumference," replied Jack, scratching his head.

"Stiff-circled?—something that would roll, you know?"

"Yes."

Joram reached up—he was so tall as to accomplish it without difficulty—to the gilded curtain-pole upon which was strung the wooden rings attached to the *portiere* hangings over the arched entrance to the sleeping alcove, and began to disconnect one of the rings.

Avice could not refrain from a slight start, while her interest deepened. The man was going to apply precisely the same test which had served to guide her to the bracelet's hiding-place so opportunely.

In fact he did apply it, causing the ring to fall from its place on the edge of the toilette-case by a jarring shock of the hand against the bureau, just as she had done.

But, several essays were required, the ring, on being placed in different positions, falling and rolling off in as many chance directions, only to bring up under a chair, a table, a bracket, a spider-legged vase-stand, or some similar object equally barren of suggestion.

At last, however, it disappeared under the low book-case, just as the ring top of the hair-pin had done, and somehow Avice caught her breath a little as it did so.

"This looks promising," said he, and he had hold of the case in an instant, to move it out from the wall. "But wait!" he was looking down at its foot rests. "This piece of furniture has already been moved out and back again, and but recently." And he looked up inquiringly—strangely enough not at Jack so directly as at Avice herself.

"Not within a month or two, so far as I know," replied Sterling.

"It would hardly have been likely," added Avice, coolly.

"So!" And then the book-case was displaced by a vigorous, unassisted movement.

The curtain-ring had come to a tilted stop up against the base-board, and less than a foot away from the cranny at the carpet-edge, which the detective was quick to descry and to investigate.

"Hallo!" he muttered, rising and facing the others, after the minutest examination. "But, it's a clew, any way, even if a vanishing one."

"What do you make out, Rod?" cried Jack, somewhat excitedly.

"Some object has found a hiding-place in that crack—probably the missing bracelet itself—but has been discovered and carried off quite recently, perhaps within twenty-four hours. We are forestalled."

"Impossible!—that is, I can scarcely credit it," exclaimed Jack.

"No search can have been made by the servants on their own account, I am certain of that," said Avice, with a fine air of incredulity. "Are you so sure of your *clew*, Mr. Marjoram?" with a curl of the lip.

"Miss Hollister, I am rarely ever mistaken," sententiously. "Think now; what outsider can have been alone in this apartment—uninterruptedly alone, you know—say within the past twenty-four or thirty-six hours?"

"Why, nobody but my seamstress, Miss Forrest!" replied Avice, with a quick pulse of joy at the fateful jibing of all this with her plot, while Jack stared a little blankly. "I had her in here with her sewing for the greater part of to-day."

"Ha! Trustworthy young woman?"

"Irreproachably so!" cried Sterling, impetuously.

"Miss Forrest enjoys my fullest confidence," added Avice, with difficulty masking her peculiar smile.

"All right!" and Three-fingered Joram forthwith replaced the book-case after recovering the curtain-ring. "There is no other clew to look for. He coolly restored the ring to its *portiere* connection. "And now, Jack, old boy, I must be going."

"But, hold on, Rod!" more or less confusedly. "You won't follow up the clew, then?"

"Why of course—by cross examining Miss Forrest—if you say so!"

Jack colored furiously.

"Not to be thought of!" he exclaimed. "Good Lord! the idea of insulting that little angel—I mean—but no matter, I simply won't hear of it!"

The detective had glanced from his flushing face to the composed countenance of Avice, with a queer look of intelligence in his beady little eyes.

"Then I must be going," he said; and he led the way out of the room in a silent, undulatory way.

"I say, Avice!" said Jack, after a long, deliberating pause.

He was standing before her, hat in hand, in the drawing-room, after the detective's departure.

"Well, Jack?" she looked up from the piano, over whose keys her fingers were carelessly but melodiously straying in a dreamy way.

"Don't you think that Rod Marjoram, since his becoming a detective, has developed into a good-deal of an egotistical ass?"

"Why not say 'queer fish'?" laughing, but still sweeping the keys with her soft touch; "for he slips and swims, rather than moves and walks. However, you know I could never bear him, even as a boy."

"Yes, yes; but apart from that, the idea of his really pretending to find a clew to my missing bracelet by that hocus-pocus with the curtain-ring!"

"Rather clever, I thought—though perhaps a little far-fetched."

"Far-fetched? Good Lord, I should say so! And the idea of his undertaking to connect Miss Forrest with the thing!—Not—not that I am more than interested in the young woman on general principles, you understand?" a little anxiously.

"Oh, of course," indifferently. "However, think no more of the bracelet. It should be an exhausted sensation by this time."

"Just what I think!" cried the young man, almost gratefully.

"But, look here, Jack," playing with only one hand now, and half-turning while looking up to him in her innocent, arch way. "There is another thing we have got to face, you know?"

"Yes, I suppose so, Avvy," uncomfortably.

"Don't think it may not be as distasteful to me as to you, Jack," and she at last let the keys alone, looking entrancingly pensive and lovely in the rather dim light, her hands folded in her lap, the toe of her tiny slipper idly tracing out one of the arabesques in the carpet. "But then Uncle Hal is getting even more than impatient. There is no denying that. And we can't very well get over the—the worldly, or money, consideration, you know?"

Sterling maintained a moody silence for a moment. Why couldn't he surrender himself, heart, soul, blood, brains and spirit, to this peerlessly lovely creature before him? How brilliantly, ay, and how subtly, how intellectually, too, she outshone Bertha Forrest's demurely soft womanliness in almost everything that men mostly demand of their ideals! and yet—Well, he simply couldn't! However, he suddenly caught hopefully at something she had said, or implied.

"Tell me truly, Avice!" he exclaimed, eagerly seizing her hands; "would it be distasteful to you, then?"

She laughed coquettishly.

"You think I shall admit that, simply because I know it to be so distasteful to you?"

His face flushed again.

"I wish you would or could admit that!" he murmured, hoarsely.

"Why?" half-bitterly, though she laughed again. "To save you the pain of *pitying me?*"

"Good God! it is not that—not wholly that." He suddenly caught her in his arms with indescribable excitement. "Avice—my cousin—it is because I am not worthy of you—because the mercenariness, the sordidness, of this engagement of ours, in which neither of us have had any choice, is simply appalling. Let my uncle's fortune go!" wildly. "I can and shall, if you cannot, even though he cast me a beggar on the world. But, there is more than that. Oh, if I could but tell you all, but I cannot—at least not yet, not yet!"

He pressed her for an instant to his bosom, and was gone.

She stood where he had left her, her eyes staring at the vacant door, the echo of his swift footsteps over the marble flagging of the hall, even the opening and closing of the street-door

that gave him egress out into the night, sounding in her senses like a despairing melody.

Why should she care for him whose heart was another's, if her own heart was emotionless and dead?

Her bosom heaved tumultuously, her eyes blazed, her breath came thick and fast through her red parted lips and her delicate nostrils, and the beautiful hands, flashing with their jewels, which she stretched out graspingly, unresignedly after him, their finger-ends hooked upward like the talons of a rapacious bird.

Resign him, and to her? Was there naught else but love, the cheated heart to satisfy? Could any other than his fair, yellow-locked and *debonnaire* image fill the place in her woman's imagination where it had grown so steadily, so glowingly, and been nursed and cherished from the first?

"Never! never!"

The words came out of her lips, with a low, wailing laugh, as if in response to a prolonged expostulation.

Then she threw herself upon the piano in a sort of frenzy—it was an old habit of hers when overwrought or perplexed, and dashed off into a weird, anonymous composition which she only remembered by its title of "The Devil's Dream."

CHAPTER VII.

"THE FLY IN THE AMBER."

UPON setting out on her accustomed walk in Central Park at early light of the following morning, Bertha Forrest directed her steps, as was her wont, toward the lonely and more secluded quarter of the noble pleasure ground that lies to the north of the great reservoir.

The June morning was fresh, airy and sweet, the bird-notes were slowly evolving into song out of their first aimless twitterings, all was green, delicious solitude, with not even the gray uniform of a Park policeman to be seen as yet, and as she strolled on, her step grew brisk, her eyes bright, her mind clear, her heart hopeful buoyant.

Constitutionally sound, but not strong, these early morning walks, which Bertha had persistently kept up, with scarcely an interruption, for more than a year, had done much toward enabling her to retain her good health throughout the unvarying monotony of her sedentary indoor vocation, besides preserving her natural elasticity of mind and spirit amid the uncongenial conditions, that were so often inseparable from her changed prospects in life.

She had, however, accepted her changed lot with a quiet heroism of resignation, which was one of the fundamental forces of her character; and her history therefore had been almost wholly uneventful.

Left an orphan when still but an infant, the mother surviving the shock of the husband and father's death in battle by but a few months, Bertha had been lovingly mothered, cared for and educated by her only aunt, Mrs. Partelow, Colonel Forrest's only sister, a widow lady of a noble heart and a sufficient income. The orphan had, moreover, her pension. She had, therefore, been enabled to acquire an education in keeping with her natural tastes and advantages, which were refined and above the average. Then, when Bertha was but eighteen, had come her aunt's double misfortune—permanent prostration by paralytic stroke, and the loss of her income, almost at one fell blow—with the hard change in the condition of both which has already been adverted to. From that bitter hour, the girl's lot had been that of the hard-worked needlewoman in which our story finds her.

But she had borne her cross uncomplainingly, as we have seen; these communings with nature in the freshness of the dawning day had in a measure kept alive the elements of hope and joy, which might otherwise have wholly starved; and then of late, unfolding before her like a divine compensation, had not love itself, the love of a noble and chivalric young man, come to her as to so many maiden hearts that had dreamed and waited and longed since first the world was life with the humanity that is its soul?

It is therefore no wonder that Bertha Forrest's heart beat softly with new thoughts and new emotions, and that the sweet prospects of the deserted Park seemed to take on new suggestions for her whilom jaded life, on this morning in particular when "she walked with nature and her maiden dreams."

She was even altogether heedless of a close carriage that slowly approached along one of the interior driveways, under the bluff-wall of the great reservoir, as she was leisurely crossing it to reach her favorite ramble, and which might otherwise have challenged her curiosity, if not her recognition.

A moment later, the vehicle had come to a pause close at hand, and a not unfamiliar voice pronounced her name.

"What, Tom—Mr. Baylis!" she exclaimed, facing the young man, without exactly realizing that he had stepped out of the coach. "It is you?"

But she had only time to notice that he was very pale, with a strange tightening of his face, before he suddenly seized her pressing a soft handkerchief over her mouth and nostrils.

She struggled but for an instant, was then dimly conscious of being lifted up in his arms, and knew no more.

As for her abductor, he folded his arms, and contemplated the young woman with such hopeless misery at heart as he had never known before.

She was reclining as if entranced, and the coach in which they were proceeding rapidly, almost noiselessly over the smooth, level driveways.

"How she will hate me! how she will loathe me!" was the one iterated thought that possessed him. "Though she could not love me, she at least liked me, I had her respect and confidence—but now, after she shall come to know my baseness!"

It was all he could think of. His dull, aching mental misery grew upon him with every mile that was covered, and yet he would gladly have had the twenty-mile drive to Cragby outlast the day, so terrible was the bugbear of the revelation that he would have to make.

Cragby was a handsome, but unpretentious estate on the Hudson midway between Irvington and Tarrytown.

Just before coming in view of the house itself, the coach turned into a deeply wooded lane toward the river.

In less than five minutes more it came to a pause before a red little old house, almost buried away among the trees, but with glimpses of the noble river in sight, where an old colored couple were waiting expectantly.

Baylis lifted the unconscious Bertha out of the carriage, and consigned her without a word to the woman of the pair, who disappeared with her into the house.

Then he made a sign to the coachman, who at once drove away, and then sat down stupidly on the porch steps of the habitation.

Presently the old colored man reappeared.

"De young leddy am all right, sah," he announced.

Baylis now for the first time studied the man intelligently. A sturdy old negro, with a not unkind, but very secretive-looking face—that was all.

"I have forgotton," said he, "to learn your name of either Miss Hollister or the coachman."

"Dat am soon remedied, sah," was the reply, with an egotistical grin. "I'se Ole Sam, an' my ole ooman am Ole Kate. Moresomeober, she war Miss Hollister's nurse, an' I war once her pa's sarvant. You am Mr. Baylis, de gemman what hab done de job."

"Ah, you are well enough informed, it seems," and Baylis gave a harsh laugh. "Yes, that's it," hopelessly. "I am the gentleman who has done the job! Well, look you, Old Sam, just as soon as the young lady realizes her situation, and the infernal, black-hearted and contemptible hound that I have made of myself, suppose you let me know."

"Yes, sah." And old Sam, after looking at him curiously, stepped back into the house.

The colored woman next appeared, and Baylis looked at her eagerly; for as long as Bertha should be kept a prisoner here she would doubtless be chiefly under this woman's care.

His heart misgave him. Old Kate was less prepossessing than old Sam. She was a very fat old yellow woman, and her face seemed to express nothing but low cunning and greed, together with something else—a leering, mocking look—which he dared not analyze.

"De young leddy am all right, sah," she said, in the exact words that her husband had used, but in an oily tone that seemed to be quite her own.

"Will she see me?" inquired young Mr. Baylis, starting up.

"Dat an jes' what she done wants, sah. Don't be oneasy, sah. De young leddy am berry quiet," with a reassuring leer.

"What tells you I am uneasy?" he cried, angrily. "Lead the way!"

He was conducted to a large, low-ceiled upstairs room, doubtless the best of the house, decently furnished as a bed-chamber, where Bertha was seated at one of two windows, both of which were seen to be provided with stout wooden outside bars.

Bertha was neither of the fainting nor the violently demonstrative sort. She was looking a little pale, as if the after-effects of her chloroforming might have made her ill, but she was perfectly composed, with a look in her eyes which was rather of bewildered, perhaps beseeching, inquiry than anything else.

As soon as they were alone, Baylis hastened to say:

"I am aware that I am henceforth simply a villain in your eyes, Bertha, but you shall know everything. Listen."

He then seated himself near her, and related the details of the entire plot of which she was the victim.

The girl heard him with growing astonishment, such as can readily be imagined.

"I could never have thought Miss Hollister capable of this," was the first quiet comment; and then, more collectedly, and after a pause: "What do you think of it all, Tom?"

They had known each other long, and had even had confidences, even after the young man

had come to think that his love might never be returned. But the generous magnanimity of this sort of reception all but broke him down.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed; "can you still treat me decently, even a little trustingly, after what I have done, Bertha?"

She smiled—it was the old gentle, strengthful smile that he knew so well and loved so dearly.

"Poor Tom!" she said, pityingly, "you have been weak—I am sorry you have had so little moral courage—but that is all. Now tell me what I ask, do, please."

"But I—I don't exactly understand," he stammered. "What else is it you would know, Bertha?"

"The cause of Miss Hollister's enmity against me, if you can guess it."

"But can't you guess it?"

"Only vaguely. Is it—about Mr. Sterling, do you think?"

"Of course it is!" bitterly. "You love him, do you not? and I suppose he loves you?"

She blushed and hesitated, for she was not unaware of Baylis's hopeless passion for herself.

"Don't spare me!" he cried, still more bitterly. "Of course, it is just killing me to know that my case is hopeless. But, good Lord! am I the cur to complain, after what has happened?"

She took his hand.

"Dear friend, I not only forgive but pity you!" she said. "Don't be so sad. If you have come to love me, it is not my fault, and I would have loved you in return if it had been possible. But it wasn't, Tom."

"Of course, it wasn't—I understand!" he turned away his head. "Well," slowly recovering his self-possession, "here it is in a nutshell, my dear girl. Avise Hollister is also in love with Jack Sterling. Doesn't that explain everything?"

"Not for me, or not quite, Tom. I can imagine her discovering my secret, perhaps, and her consequent jealousy; but not her having undertaken to wrong me to this extent."

"I can, though!" exclaimed Baylis, promptly. "That young woman is a masked volcano, with a heart of ice—if such a grotesque anomaly is conceivable—and jealousy has transformed her nature, albeit instinctively generous, into that of adamant. She will have it believed that you and I have eloped, and trust for the consequent reaction to throw Sterling into her arms. That is all there is about it."

"What would you advise me to do?" asked Bertha, after a still longer pause.

"Do you—can you trust in my honor and disinterestedness?"

"I both can and do."

Here there was a knock at the door, and old Kate appeared, with a neatly folded piece of note-paper held between the thumb and forefinger of her fat, yellow hand, and a self-important look in her round, animal-like eyes.

"Must hab drapped out of de coach when you was a-liftin' de young leddy out, sah," she said. "My ole man jes' pick it up on de dribeway."

After she had again quitted the room, Baylis looked up from an examination of the paper with a peculiar smile.

CHAPTER VIII.

WEBBED IN.

"HERE are my additional instructions," said the young man, pointing to the writing on the inside of the paper. "I know Miss Hollister's handwriting. This is hers, though cleverly disguised. Observe, also, these pin-holes at the edge. She had doubtless pinned the paper to the upholstery of the coach, deeming that it would attract my attention at the outset. Read it."

Bertha accordingly read the following lines, which bore neither address nor signature, and were in pencil:

"Make the most of your vacation, which I learn has already been given you. If you do not, you will be more than a fool—you will incur the resentment of one who will not know how to forgive. You must do more. It is necessary that no doubt should remain as to your elopement with B. F. Her wardrobe will therefore have to be conveyed to her forthwith, before an investigation takes place. Do not fail in this."

"Is the meaning of that a puzzle to you?" asked Baylis.

"No, it is sufficiently plain," replied Miss Forrest, handing him back the paper with a new collectedness and resoluteness of manner. "Tom, I told you I would and could trust in you. What was it you were about to advise?"

"That you should resign yourself to your present situation, and—wait."

"I agree with you perfectly. Nay, more, I shall give you an order for my trunk, and you shall have it conveyed to me as speedily and secretly as possible. Fortunately, I packed it last night, thinking to presently treat myself to a change of scene up at Fordham, in order that I might see my aunt uninterruptedly every day at her hospital asylum, which is in that vicinity. Will you do this for me, my friend?"

"I will, indeed! But may I first entreat something of your confidence?"

"What you please?"

"What is your object in thus giving the very

coloring to the affair that your enemy, Miss Hollister, so much desires?"

"To test the sincerity of Jack Sterling's declared love for me."

"You may find it difficult to believe me," Baylis said, after a troubled hesitation. "But that was precisely what influenced my advice to the same end—that, associated—I frankly confess it—with a vague hope on my own part."

"I do believe you, my friend. Now pray explain yourself more fully."

"Well, I continue to love you, though perhaps hopelessly. Do you believe that?"

She looked up gently.

"Yes," in a low voice; "and I regret it."

"Never mind that. I—I am trying to be an honest fellow, Bertha, if it breaks my heart. Well, you are not for me—you love Sterling, and, if he prove worthy of you, I shall give in like a man. But, in view of his cousin's extraordinary attractions, the long *engagement de convenance* between them, my knowledge of his luxurious habits (though I candidly credit him with being singularly free from vices, to the best of my knowledge), and of what his breaking of that engagement, and open defiance of Mr. Hollister's wishes, would mean to him—being nothing less than a step from princely affluence to comparative beggary—when I think of all these things, I cannot find it in my conscience to believe him sincere with you. It will be a test indeed, and a test with a vengeance. And if he should fail to withstand it, well," with lowered eyes, his voice trembling, "there is where my hope would come in, as you might say."

"Tom, I am afraid that could never be in any event. However, I trust you implicitly. Now see if you can get me some writing materials, and I will give you an order for my trunk. Here is the key to my rooms."

Half an hour later, Baylis was on his way back to New York from the nearest railway station, which was at Irvington, less than two miles distant from the negro tenant house at Craggsby.

More or less delay, however, had necessarily intervened.

It was well on into the afternoon when he arrived at the apartment house in East Ninety-eighth street, accompanied by an expressman in whose discretion he thought he could trust.

Leaving him at the entrance he sought out the janitor, and presented the order for the trunk.

"Miss Forrest has given me her key," he said, while the man was scanning the order. "I can fetch down the trunk without assistance."

"All right, sir," replied the janitor, with some slight surprise. "Will Miss Forrest be long absent from the city, sir?"

"I am not at liberty to say," replied Baylis, who had formerly visited the young lady not infrequently, and was somewhat known to the man.

"But she will retain her rooms?"

"Oh, yes; I am to return her the key."

"Pray, excuse the questions I have asked, sir. I wish all the tenants might be as quiet and prompt-paying as Miss Forrest, and I should regret to lose her."

With what different sentiments from those which had animated the proud beauty, Avie Hollister, did Tom Baylis stand alone in the young needlewoman's chastely simple apartments a few minutes later!

His love for her was exceptionally unselfish, and, being of a chivalrous disposition, her little domicile was to him nothing less than a sanctuary and a shrine. Moreover, he had never penetrated its privacy as now, alone, and without due preparation on the part of the occupant in keeping with the strictest proprieties.

The communicating doors were open for the airing, just as she had left them for that early morning walk which had found such a strange and unexpected ending, but the rooms had been scrupulously "put to rights" before her departure.

He looked around him in the cozy little parlor, where he had passed so many an evening hour in agreeable chat with her, while secretly cherishing the love and admiration which he had so fondly hoped to one day successfully avow, before this despair of knowing that she was not for him, but for another, had shut down so bleakly and blighting upon his heart, crushing out his hopes, his dreams, almost life itself—everything but his manly sense of honor and duty.

All was unchanged, or nearly so, though it was now many weeks since he had suspected the disheartening truth, and consequently ceased his visits. The handsome edition of Tennyson on the center table was his own gift, and scattered among the tasteful but inexpensive *bric à brac* of the spindling little whatnot in the well-remembered corner were several pretty things which he had brought to her from time to time—insignificant in themselves, but hallowed and made precious by her acceptance—

"As to his queen some victor knight of fairy
Bringing bright spoils for her enchanted dome."

Then it was still harder when, turning with a sigh, he for the first time looked into the adjoining bedchamber.

In the slang parlance of the day, young Mr. Baylis may have been decidedly "fresh" as yet

—something of a "chump," in fact—but his heart was in the right place, and there was not an unworthy thought or suggestion to deteriorate the flood of passionate and despairing regretfulness that came over him.

"I loved her so dearly, I could have so striven and strained to make her happy and embellish her little home, her every environment!" he murmured, a hot tear or two coursing down his cheeks from which so much of their native freshness had latterly departed. "Really, you know, I am afraid it is all up with me in this world. But it is so hard to bear, so hard, so hard!"

He stamped his foot half-furiously. Then, perceiving the trunk, ready strapped and fastened, but with the key still in the lock, at the foot of the bed, he hurriedly carried it into the front room, as a preliminary to heaving it upon his broad shoulder.

But at this juncture there was sound of the numerous feet on the adjoining stairs, and he was still stooping over the trunk when the door was pushed open.

"Do be quiet, Jack!" Avie Hollister's petulant voice was heard to exclaim. "If my suspicions are groundless, I shall be the first to make amends to Miss Forrest. But I insist on the search proceeding!"

Here Avie herself entered, looking flushed and excited. She was accompanied by Jack Sterling and young Marjoram, the detective, with whom the astonished Baylis was slightly acquainted; while the janitor and expressman brought up the rear, round-eyed and agape with a sort of expectant curiosity.

"Bless me! you here, Mr. Baylis?" cried Avie, with unaffected surprise. "The janitor did not say it was you we should find here. Where is Miss Forrest? And where were you to take the trunk to her? Let it alone, please, at least for the present. Perhaps you might as well begin with the young woman's trunk, Mr. Marjoram, as with anything else."

Baylis had risen straight up, and was staring at them bewilderedly.

But as the detective began to unstrap the trunk with unceremonious celerity, he suddenly shook off his mystification, at least in part.

"What the deuce do you mean?" he exclaimed, roughly interfering. "The trunk is in my charge—I have given the janitor a written order for it."

Rod Marjoram also rose, solemnly lengthening himself up like a species of elastic and undulatory telescope.

"Young chap," he softly replied, with a quizzical look that might also be a danger signal in his puckered face, "don't meddle."

But upon the detective making a movement to renew his examination of the trunk, the young Englishman forthwith threw off his coat, and fell into a significant attitude.

"Don't you dare!" he said, quietly.

Avie placed herself between the two, while Jack Sterling muttered half-under the breath: "It is an infernal, shameful outrage, and no mistake!"

"That remains to be seen, sir," interposed Miss Hollister, coldly. "Mr. Baylis, with a penetrating look that was sufficiently understood by the latter, 'this complication may be in some measure simplified by your answering my first question—'Where is Miss Forrest, and where were you to take that trunk to her?'"

"I am not at liberty to answer you," replied Baylis, remembering his convention with Bertha.

"As you please, sir. Then plain talk is in order. Briefly, she is suspected of having eloped with you to-day. That, however, would be altogether her own affair, but for a graver suspicion. The young woman is suspected, also, of having robbed me of a costly diamond necklace, besides appropriating Mr. Sterling's long-missing heirloom (an antique bracelet, set with diamonds,) as a preliminary to her alleged clandestine flight with you."

"Speak for yourself!" all but roared Jack, with a half-desperate gesture. "I charge the young lady with nothing of the sort!"

Altogether unheeding him, Miss Hollister motioned to Joram, who again bent over the trunk, without any further resistance from the now stupefied young Englishman, and continued:

"It is wholly on my responsibility that the charge has been made, and Mr. Marjoram is provided with a regular warrant for prosecuting this search."

The detective's manipulation of the trunk, in whose lock the key still remained sticking, was distinguished by a lightning-like dexterity which proved him an expert in affairs of so delicate a nature. He had the lid up in a trice, and then, with a slippery lightness of touch, proceeded to remove and examine the contents, article by article, with a combined facility and fastidiousness upon which the cleverest of female Custom House inspectors might have patterned her methods to advantage.

Avie viewed the operation with well-bred composure, while both Sterling and Baylis, whose feelings had perhaps been equally shocked at the outset, found themselves painfully interested in the result of the search, in spite of their incredulity.

Jack, however, incontinently turned the janitor and expressman out of the room just as it began, with a half-indignant glance toward his cousin, at whose indirect instance they had been brought upon the scene, but which she received with the most perfect indifference.

The upper tray of the trunk was speedily emptied of its contents, and these neatly replaced, without any revelation.

Then the body of the case was similarly, but more slowly ransacked, by reason of the greater voluminousness of the articles to be examined, until this, too, was finally emptied to all appearances, with no better success.

Baylis drew a long breath of what would have been relieved suspense, had he really entertained the slightest doubt of Bertha's innocence, which of course he did not, while Jack turned to his cousin with a look slowly hardening in his face and eyes which caused her no little secret uneasiness, though the outward composure of her beautiful face and stately mien was not ruffled in the least.

"It really looks as though I may have been overhasty," she said at last, while the detective was bending down into the deep trunk, his head and shoulders half-lost to view. "If it turns out that I have accused her wrongfully, I shall be the first—"

"Wait!" from somewhere down in the trunk, which was of the Saratoga or Noah's ark dimensions. "Ah!" accompanied by a tapping and scraping sound; "here we are."

And Joram slowly raised himself, with both the missing heirloom and Miss Hollister's necklace in his hand.

With his queer little cannon-ball head, his wooden, sphinx-like face, his long black-clad leanness of frame, he looked like a Mephistophelean Don Quixote, as, with the recovered ornaments in one hand, he pointed with the bony forefinger of the other down into the bottom compartment, out of which he had taken them.

Miss Hollister was prudently magnanimous in her exultation.

She merely glanced once at Baylis and her cousin, who were equally shocked and horror-struck; and then, signing the detective to lay the jewels on the table, she assisted him with her woman's wit and dispatch in the neat restoration of the contents of the trunk; which, at another sign from her, he once more strapped and locked, handing the key to her.

She in her turn handed it to the young Englishman, with the quiet remark:

"There will be no prosecution—the stolen property recovered, nothing more will be done."

Baylis, who had picked up the necklace, and was examining it in an unreal, stupefied way, suddenly glared at her dangerously.

"It's a plot—a vile, treacherous plot against the purest, best woman on earth!" he hoarsely cried, dashing down the trinket at her feet. "I'll swear it—ay, and if opportunity is afforded me, I'll prove it, too!"

Jack, who was white as a sheet, simply thrust his recovered heirloom into his pocket.

But, as Avie coolly opened the door to admit the expressman, who, at a sign from her, at once shouldered the trunk, and Baylis was mechanically following him out of the room, he suddenly grasped the young Englishman by the arm.

"Tell me the truth, Baylis!" he gasped. "Did—did Miss Forrest really quit the city with you to-day?"

Baylis glared at his rival blankly, but misery had placed them on common ground for the time being.

"She did, on my honor!" he replied, in a low, broken voice, and then hurried away with a faltering step.

Jack merely looked out of the window, to perceive him get on the wagon with the expressman, and drive away.

As his back was turned, Avie said to the detective softly:

"Come to see me this evening, Mr. Marjoram. I wish to confer with you."

Joram nodded.

"Then she turned to the janitor, who had remained standing in the doorway."

"My friend," she said, slipping him a coin, which his sense of touch apprised him was of gold, "you must think no more of this affair. I trust in your discretion to forget it."

The man remained at the door after their departure.

"Well," he muttered, looking down at the bright ten-dollar gold piece that glistened in his hand, "if this don't beat me, may I be blowed!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE GALL IN THE CUP.

THE manner in which Avie Hollister had led the way up to one of the chief evolutions of her plot against her rival was a very simple affair.

Being assured by her uncle's coachman as to the abduction being an accomplished fact, she was next fortuitously assisted toward her desired end by Jack Sterling putting in an unwonted appearance at lunch, accompanied by his old play-fellow and *quasi* foster-brother, Rod Marjoram.

She had therefore concernedly mentioned the

non-arrival of Miss Forrest in pursuance of her accustomed duties, together with the statement that her diamond necklace, which she remembered to have carelessly left exposed in an upper dressing-case drawer during the preceding day, had mysteriously disappeared.

This, in connection with the eel-skinned phenomenon's revelation with regard to the missing heirloom on the previous day, was not without the desired effect, and Miss Hollister had followed it up boldly by saying:

"If Miss Forrest has really committed these thefts, it is my impression that she has done so as a preliminary to making a runaway marriage with Tom Baylis; who obtained his summer furlough of Uncle Hal yesterday." [Mr. Hollister was not present at lunch.] "At all events, the young man once confessed to me that he loved her to distraction, and I have no reason to doubt her reciprocation of the attachment."

"I don't believe a word of it!" Jack had burst out, retaining his guardedness with the utmost difficulty. "I believe Miss Forrest to be absolutely incapable of anything you would impute to her, and if the young couple were disposed to marriage why should they run away to gratify their desire? It is too outrageously preposterous!"

"It assuredly would be so," serenely, "should she prove to really know nothing of my necklace or your ancestral bracelet, Jack."

Then the detective had proposed the visit of inquiry to the needlewoman's rooms, and, upon the proposition being acceded to, he had procured the necessary search-warrant, and the *denouement* had been duly precipitated as we have seen.

On her return home alone, after the investigation, Avie lost no time in taking both Dorton, her maid, and Mrs. Marjoram into her confidence as to the result which had apparently so blackened her rival's character beyond retrieval.

"It's awful!" exclaimed Dorton, throwing up her hands. "Owhever, I halway suspected that sewing-woman, miss, from the werry minute I set heyes on 'er. In spite of 'er innocent ways, she really put on more hairs in secret than there was 'airs on 'er 'ead. But do you think Mr. Baylis was halso into the conspiracy, miss?"

"By no means," Avie hastened to say. "His astonishment and bewilderment over the exposure was wholly unaffected. But should he rejoin the young woman, which is more than likely, notwithstanding this exposure of her dishonesty, he may find some difficulty in justifying himself."

"All this is very terrible!" Mrs. Marjoram had commented, on her part, for she was naturally a kind-hearted woman. "On the contrary to what you say, Dorton, I always liked Miss Forrest, and this entanglement seems to me all the more dreadful on that account. However," brightening up a little, "since my neevy, the detective, is in the affair, the whole thing will be unraveled in short order, you can depend on it."

These confidences—deliberately made by Avie with the intention of having the shameful story circulated throughout the household with the greatest dispatch and thoroughness—took place in her boudoir while she was dressing for dinner.

Both Jack and the detective had separated from her at the door of the Ninety-eighth apartment house, going off she knew not whither, though she was quite sure that the former would not be long in bringing his heart-ache and bewilderment home with him.

As soon as she heard Mr. Hollister come into the house, she lost not a moment in following him with the entire affair.

The old gentleman was so astounded as to be furiously angry, in sheer self-defense, as it were.

"Good God! what a dirty criminal mess to take place in my own house," he exclaimed. "I would never have dreamed of such a thing as to that young woman. She always appeared to me— But there is no accounting for deceptive appearances in this world. As for that rascal, Baylis—however, why should I have any special complaint against the young fellow, any way?"

"You mustn't blame him at all, uncle," cried Avie, eagerly. "Nothing can implicate him in my mind with the young woman's dishonesty. And if they are really married by this time, which is more than likely, it will be all the manlier of him to stand by her through thick and thin."

"True, true! and yet—oh, it is a beastly tangle all through, my dear!" with an impatient gesture. "However," after a pause, and rather briskly, "I don't know as I would so greatly regret the thing, after all—altogether apart, though, from this blackening slur upon the poor girl's reputation, as a matter of course."

"Poor girl, indeed!" exclaimed Avie, with a contemptuous curl of her short upper lip.

"Yes, yes!" a little testily. "Most likely it is her first fault, and who knows how she may have been tempted?—However, let be, let be!"

"But why might you not have regretted the occurrence so much, Uncle Hal?"

"I'll tell you, my dear," he hesitated. "Dash

it all! do you know I began to half-suspect that Jack was cherishing a—a liking for that girl, my dear?"

"Absurd!"

"Of course, and thank the Lord it is so! But look you, Avie, there must be no further dilly-dallying over this engagement."

"Is it I who have been dilly-dallying, uncle?" asked the young beauty sweetly.

"Gad, no; I suppose not," and he took her in his arms and kissed her doatingly. "But if it is Jack's fault, what in the world can he be waiting for or thinking of?"

She laughed up into his admiring face with the sweet, coquettish look that never failed to touch his heart.

"For better looks, and a more amiable temper, like enough," she replied.

"And where would he find them?—not on this earth, surely! But pish! this is nonsense."

"But really, Uncle Hal, Jack might not think so."

"He's got to think so!" cried Mr. Hollister. "Good God! aren't you generally recognized as the loveliest girl in New York and one of the richest? If Jack should— But enough! Avvy, look to it on your part, this matter shall be settled to-day—directly after dinner, and for good. If you choose to prepare Jack for what is before him, you can take or make your opportunity."

"I prepare him!" her face was little less than ravishing for the rich blush that mantled it. "What are you thinking of, uncle? Besides, Jack is not at home yet."

"See to it between you, see to it!" cried the old gentleman, bustling impatiently away to his sleeping-room for a before-dinner toilette. "Once for all it's got to be settled—look to it, my dear Avie, and have Jack look to it, too!"

But Jack did not make his appearance at dinner, and Avie was walking up and down the veranda, turning the situation over and over in her mind, her uncle lazily enjoying his post-prandial cigar in an easy-chair at the further end, when Dorton made a sign to her from one of the dining-room windows.

"Mr. Jack's in his room, miss," the maid whispered.

"Are you sure?" exclaimed Avie in surprise.

"Oh, yes, miss! 'Ee must 'ave slipped in with 'is key—and, oh, miss, looking that awful!"

Avie dismissed her, and then ran up-stairs, pausing softly at the door of her dressing-room, with her eyes fixed upon Jack's partly-ajar door, which was on the opposite side of the hall, and a little further back.

Listening intently, she could detect a slight movement in his room.

She advanced a step toward it, then paused, and then noiselessly slipped into her own room, and surveyed herself in her full-length mirror, which was filled with a rich, roseate light reflected from an adjoining window into which the sunset was pouring its enamored beams.

Why wasn't Jack Stirling, the only man on earth she cared a fig for, infatuated with the image framed in the depths of the clear glass there, as every other man of her acquaintance was?

Beautiful as an Eastern houri of romance, she stood out against the glowing background, the luxurious presence of a seraglio vision, meltingly tender and dark, fair as the goddess of a god's dream!

From the diamond-bedewed corals at her throat and ears, to the blood-colored Jacqueminot rose at her belt, seemingly just holding together by the merest link the voluptuous *Directoire* short waist of her exquisitely-fitting gown of the purest, filmiest white—from top to toe, she was the most perfect embodiment of graceful brunette beauty imaginable.

And Jack was such a pronounced blonde, too—of the blooming, fresh-colored type, which the Spanish-American women call *un Colorado*, and so idolize!

Lord Brandymere, her English admirer, would go into idiotic ecstasies over her at this moment with the slightest encouragement. So would every man that she knew, and, many a prime 'catch' among them at that—only and always excepting Jack! How could he, how dared he, remain an exception, especially when he must know, must long since have guessed, that—

But no, it was no longer love that she felt for him, though perhaps a sentiment no less inflamed, invincible and jealous; and, could he guess the truth, her chances were even worse than now.

Chasing a momentary frown from her brow, she abruptly turned her back on the glass, and proceeded directly, unguardedly to his room.

He was seated at his writing-table, with his face buried in his hands, but at the sound of her entrance, he looked up askance at her.

"Oh, it is you, Avie?" he said in a changed, strained voice, that was scarcely less pitiable than his haggard, woebegone face. "What is it, cousin?"

By a strong effort, she paid no heed to his misery, which at best could not but cause her more exasperation than pity.

"Jack," said she, quietly, "Uncle Hal wants to talk with us together—you must know for what."

He sprang to his feet, a sudden fury rushing into his face.

"Avie!" he cried, hoarsely; "you must suspect, more than suspect, the truth of this with regard to me. Tell me if you do, or not?"

"Suspect what?—your passing infatuation for a needlewoman who has proved herself a thief—besides preferring another to yourself?"

"You don't, you can't believe that of Bertha Forrest!"

"Dare to assert, on your reason, that you believe otherwise?"

He suddenly grasped her wrist roughly, and, putting his face menacingly close to hers, gazed sternly, suspiciously into her eyes as if he would fathom her very soul.

"By Heaven! I do assert it," he exclaimed. "Even in the face of appearances against her, I believe in the purity and innocence of Bertha Forrest, as I would believe in the innocence of my mother, were she alive and in her place! And, bark you, Cousin Avie, if I thought it were possible by your contriving that this soiling misfortune had come upon that young girl—"

She was no longer startled by his manner as at first, but she now broke away from him with a pretense of both terror and indignation.

"John Sterling, have you taken leave of your senses?" she cried, in a horror-stricken voice. "What! you would intimate me as being capable of such a thing?"

He passed his hand over his forehead in a dissatisfied, bewildered way.

"Forgive me, Avvy," he murmured. "I—I suppose I am a little 'off,' with a pitiful, forced laugh. "You see, cousin—" then with an abrupt resumption of his fierceness. "Why don't I love you?—why am I not ravished by your beauty, like all the rest of them?"

"I am sure I don't know," Avie replied, rather awkwardly, not knowing what else to say.

He laughed again, this time harshly and bitterly.

"You are docile enough, though!" sneeringly. "In obedience to our uncle's despotic command—with beggary as the price of refusal—you would fulfill this accursed marriage engagement, even knowing me to hold another dearer than yourself?"

"Yes, I would, Jack," courageously, though with a deepening of color in the soft twilight of her cheeks, "though in obedience to something else than our uncle's command."

"And that is—"

"You are scarcely generous," biting her lip, "or only in the brutal way that men know how to be. Jack, you are never out of my thoughts, the image of no other man could replace yours in my imagination!" she could not force herself to the untruth that love for him could exist in her dead heart. "But, if I would not hold you by a single hair-thread against your will, it shall be you to break with Uncle Hal, not I."

"Good! Ha, ha, ha! In other words, it shall be I to be kicked into beggary, and not you? So be it, by heaven!" with a fresh access of exasperation. "Come, we will have done with the accursed farce now and forever—we will to him at once!"

He partly composed himself by an effort, and strode abruptly out of the room, not seeming to care whether she followed or not.

Avie hesitated, turning pale. Had she so sinned, so soiled her soul for naught, and was she to lose him at last in this crucial moment? However, there was nothing else for it now, and she went after him.

But what was the matter with Jack? or had she made herself less conversant with his moral weakness than with his old-time laughing charm?

No sooner were they in Mr. Hollister's presence than she perceived him to be again pale, inert, vacillant.

"Aha, this is good, this is as it should be!" chuckled Uncle Hal, rubbing his hands, his short-sightedness disabling him from catching the expression of their looks in the twilight dimness that was stealing over the library in which he had been awaiting them, for in finishing his cigar by a stroll through the hall passage he had marked Jack's hat on the rack. "Jack, you rogue, why weren't you at dinner? But never mind; what do you come to say to me, you two?"

"Perhaps you had better say something more yourself, uncle," suggested Avie, seeing that Jack was more or less tongue-tied for the moment.

"Well, well; nothing like coming to the point. I am getting old, as you must know, my dears; and this long delay in the fulfillment of my pet scheme for your marriage has been wearing on me more than you can guess. Come, come; I sha'n't wade into it by shivering inches, toe and heel, but take a header at once. If you can't propose for yourselves, I shall do it for you. Ahem! Avie, Jack—as it is now but shank of June, how will next October do?"

"Do for what, uncle?" Jack asked, in a spiritless, lack-luster way.

"For your marriage to Avie, you dunder-head!" roared the old gentleman. "What! you

wouldn't beard me to my face, and be kicked out of home and heart, as you'd deserve to be, would you?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders with an odd little shiver.

"Oh, no, uncle," he murmured weakly. "Could you think me so *ungrateful*?" with feeble sarcasm.

"Jack, you're a daisy!" jumping up and grasping his hand. "Now, Avise, my dear?"

"Oh, uncle, I'm agreeable, of course."

"Good! good!" cried Mr. Hollister, delightedly. "That's settled!" also seizing Avise's hand and putting it in Jack's. "Embrace her, my boy! Kiss him, my dear! Your formal betrothal shall be made public to-morrow. As for the particular day in October, settle it between you. God bless you both!" And the old gentleman trotted off to his whist-hand with a rich neighbor in a high state of satisfaction with himself.

To Avise's surprise, Jack took her in his arms and kissed her gently.

Moral coward as he was, he could still feel the unfairness of her humiliation in the odious matter.

But Jack knew nothing of Avise Hollister's inner life, and it was doubtless a good thing for her that he did not.

"Dear Jack!" And, for the first time since Bertha Forrest had crossed her path, she threw her arms about his neck and kissed him with the passionate joy of assured possession that was in her jealous pride, if no longer in her beating heart.

But here there were voices at the street-door, indicating that Mr. Hollister had met some one coming in, and was coming back with him.

"It is that infernal brute, Brandymere," whispered Sterling. "I shall escape him by slipping up to my room by the servants' staircase, and thence out of the house. Good-night, coz."

How much better she would have liked it if he might only have manifested the slightest tinge of jealousy for the tilted Britisher, who was one of her most ardent admirers; but her measure of satisfaction was already so much better than she had hoped for, that she did not think of complaining.

Jack made his escape just as Mr. Hollister returned, accompanied by the visitor—a tall, athletic, polished, arrogant, fair-skinned, eminently handsome and absolutely soulless human animal of the *Vere de Vere* type, verging upon middle age; a successful gambler, an alpclimber, a tiger-slayer, an explorer, a sometime theatrical manager—when including the "protection" of a sufficiently desirable pretty actress—whose code of ethics had once been complacently summarized for the benefit of an over-inquisitive newspaper reporter in the off-hand words: "The public don't seem to understand me, you know. I am simply one of these men who don't care a straw for anybody."

As Lord Brandymere gracefully stepped forward with his easy foreign courtesy, which included some empty complimentary words, and a movement to raise Miss Hollister's lovely extended hand to his lips, Uncle Hal remained looking on from the doorway, as much as to say, "Aha, my hero! were you twenty times the lordling and woman-killer that you doubtless are, you would have no chance here. I have taken care of that!" and, with a few chuckling common-places, he went his way.

Flushed with her success, with animation in her mobile face, exultance in her dark eye, an unconsciously sensuous charm in every attitude, curve and undulation of her superbly robust yet exquisitely willowy figure, Avise's beauty, at least in the estimation of her visitor, had never appeared to greater advantage than to-night. But her first intimation that there might be other danger than surfeit in the cup that she was draining so assuredly and so recklessly was in store for her, and closer at hand than her vaguest apprehension could deem.

An hour or two of Lord Brandymere's society was disposed of, and then, after dismissing Dorton from her boudoir for the night, Avise heard a timid little tap on the door with which she was unfamiliar.

"It's only me, miss," said a little voice, with a dash of brogue in it, when Maggy, the parlor maid, was disclosed as the visitor.

"You, Maggy!" exclaimed Avise, in surprise.

"Why, what brings you here?"

"If you please, miss—that is, may I come in a minute and have a quiet bit of a word with you, miss?"

Even in the girl's hesitation there was something presumptuous, not to say impudent, which completed Miss Hollister's mystification; but she impatiently admitted her, without a word, closing the door behind her.

The girl had doubtless seldom, if ever, been admitted into Avise's dressing-room before—Dorton being very jealous of her exclusive guardianship in this particular. She stood stock-still at first, seemingly summing up with wide-eyed, covetous looks the chaste and expensive elegance of her novel surroundings.

"Faix, but money do bring happiness!" she exclaimed. "Oh, if I might only be in your two shoes, Miss Avise?"

"What do you want?" demanded the young lady, sharply.

The reply was something of a staggerer.

"Money—a present from you, ma'm!" with growing insolence. "It's a poor enough girl I am, that a silver-piece or two won't satisfy, aither."

"Quit my presence!"

"I'll not!"

"What on earth do you mean?"

"*Everything!*" looking her in the eyes unabashed. "It's a good listener on the sly I am, miss. And if you've got Mither Baylis—bad 'cess to him! but he might have been kinder to me, but for your plotting—if you have Mither Baylis under your thumb, it isn't meself that is under the same. And the poor young thing of a saintress that you've got in your false fangs, as is the common repoort through the hoose wid your hide-and-seek treachery—"

Avise silenced her with a gesture. Aghast at first, she was once more cool under her secondary rankling around; the paralyzing knowledge that her secret was no longer her own; that she was at last face to face with that closet skeleton, the Nemesis of evil-doing, blackmail.

She at once threw her arms about the girl, and kissed her with a laugh.

"You little goose!" she cried, "what can you know about me that I care for? But your silly braggadocio was not necessary to make me your friend. Here, my dear!" she snatched a five-dollar note from one of her dressing-case drawers, and gave it to her. "Not a word of thanks! You shall see me again when I feel disposed, though always alone, as a matter of course."

"Oh, thank you, miss! You see, I wu'dn't pretend or presume—"

"That will do!" kissing her again at the door. "Good-night, Maggy, and pleasant dreams!"

But Maggy was alike unconscious of the murderous glance that followed her out of the room, and of the wild, clutching movement as if in quest of a deadly weapon.

Then Avise voicelessly raved up and down the floor, and somehow or other it seemed that the furies had passed in over that threshold.

CHAPTER X.

JORAM'S TRIPLE COMMISSION.

AFTER quitting his cousin and uncle that evening, Jack Sterling did not seek his club or some place of entertainment as was his custom.

He went straight to the house of Rod Marjoram, otherwise Three-fingered Joram, the Detective Expert, who enjoyed no little domestic bliss of a modest, humble sort with his wife, his babies, and an exceptionally desirable mother-in-law, in a small house in Harlem, east side, not far from the river.

"Rod, old fellow," said Jack, at once upon finding himself alone with his whilom chum, "since parting with you this afternoon I am determined to leave my entire interest in that unhappy affair in your hands."

Joram tilted back his chair, and, cocking up his heels on a window ledge near which they were sitting, twined and plaited his long legs together like a pair of whip-lashes, while tapping his slickened round little skull with a finger of his mutilated hand, and cogitatingly pursing his wrinkled brows over his twinkling little eyes.

"What do you want me to do?" he demanded, in his soft little voice.

"To find out where Miss Forrest is, the real circumstances of her quitting the city so strangely—for I can't believe that she really eloped with Baylis, who may love her frantically enough, but is a good fellow withal—her explanation of those criminating discoveries—in fact, every detail as to her individuality and whereabouts that could possibly interest a man so deeply—so deeply interested in her future as I am."

"So! Jack, we were pretty thick when boys together, you and I."

"There is no reason why we shouldn't be still, Rod," replied Jack, warmly.

"Oh, yes, there is," philosophically. "Our 'speres,' as Artemus Ward called them, are even wider apart than ever, and necessarily. I only touched you up in that fashion in order for you to be perfectly frank with me."

"Oh, of course!" a little reluctantly.

"Does your interest in the missing young woman amount to tenderness, you know?"

"My long *engagement de convenance* to my beautiful cousin, Avise Hollister," evaded the other, slowly, "was formally ratified before Uncle Hal this evening, and we are to be married in October."

"Ha! Well, that will do. I undertake your commission forthwith, Jack—but solely and conditionally as a friendly service."

"Thank you, Rod. I may one day be rich enough to put more than one good thing in your line."

Joram grinned, while uncocking, untwisting and slowly wriggling himself into an erect attitude, as a preliminary to seeing his friend to the door.

"Money makes the mare go, Jack," he softly observed. "Count on me, though I must proceed at my leisure and take my time."

"All right, old fellow," replied Jack, reaching for his hat somewhat abstractedly. "By the

way, turn about is fair play in the interrogatory line, eh?"

"Yes; cut in."

"Why were you so particular as to the nature of my interest in Miss Forrest?"

"And which inquisitiveness you were pretty careful not to gratify, eh?" with his musical little laugh. "However, here you are. Jack, I'm an odd sort of a detective. Having, fortunately, an election at all times, it is a rule of my individual profession never to take up a commission, quest, chase, investigation, or anything of the sort, at the instance of man or woman, however liberal the promised reward, whom I deem to be actuated by dishonorable or unworthy motives—save, indeed, with the intention of cheating them at their own game, if they deserve it, and on general principles? Are you answered?"

"Yes, old fellow, and creditably to your heart, if not to your head. Good-night!" And as Jack quitted the little house, he left his odd detective friend standing in the doorway, with a pair of chubby little toddlers, of little appreciable difference in size or age, clinging to his long legs, with prattling cries, while a yet more infantile voice, suggestive of maternal nourishment or the nursing bottle, as the case might be, came out piping from somewhere in the lighted interior behind.

The following morning at nine o'clock, just as the detective was about starting out to keep his appointment with Miss Hollister, he received a visit, to his no small surprise, from no less a personage than old Mr. Hollister himself.

"You scarcely expected to have a call from me, eh, you rogue?" the old gentleman began, with a jesting flavor of the old times when his housekeeper's "nevy" was almost as privileged a familiar with him as Avise and Jack themselves. "Well, it's a matter of business—private business, Rod, particularly private business—and something that may put a snug fee in your pocket. Understand? A precious detective you'd be if you didn't! We're not liable to be interrupted, I hope."

"Not in the least, Mr. Hollister," said Joram, with a gravity that he knew would be most acceptable to the old gentleman as a man of business. "What can I do for you, sir?"

"Ahem! Well, you see, Rod," a little shame-faced and yet guardedly, "Avise has told me the entire story of that unfortunate complication with regard to Miss Forrest—a splendid young lady, an admirably proper young person, sir—who was employed by her somewhat in the seam and gusset capacity. Understand?"

"Yes, Mr. Hollister."

"Now look here, my boy, it's all wrong! I am satisfied that that young woman is in some mysterious way the victim of circumstances. I also feel confident that she cannot have made a runaway marriage with my private secretary—a mere boy, and an English boy at that, you understand, and the very last person in the world that would be likely to win the—the love and lasting esteem of such a superior young woman as Miss Forrest, who—ur—would perhaps be more apt to—to appreciate the tender sentiment in a man older—well, we'll say considerably older, a deuced sight older—than herself. Eh? You understand? I make myself plain? You follow me?"

"Quite clearly, sir, I think," replied the detective, retaining his gravity to a hair.

Mr. Hollister expatiated at yet greater length, and still more guardedly (in his own conceit,) the upshot of it all being that Joram found himself intrusted with a second commission, with the interesting needlewoman's whereabouts and personality as its controlling object, not at all dissimilar to the one already undertaken on Jack Sterling's account.

Once more alone, the apodean threw himself at full length on a convenient lounge, twisting and twining himself most alarmingly, save that he gave utterance to such bubbling little cries and watery little shouts of laughter as speedily brought his wife, his two toddlers, the cherub at the breast, and even the exceptionally desirable mother-in-law upon the scene in no little bewilderment.

But he would vouchsafe them no reasonable explanation.

"What! at the old governor's time of life?" he gurgled, in his cachinnatory idiocy. "If only Master Jack and Miss Avise could guess!"

And, with these cabalistic words, he hurried away to keep his appointment.

"Mr. Marjoram," said Miss Hollister, very seriously, and going straight to the point, the moment he had private audience of her in the old merchant's library, "I want you to find out Miss Forrest's hiding-place for me. Will you undertake the commission?"

"Yes, ma'm," was the prompt response.

"I feel that I should make you some explanation of my change of feeling in the matter—like enough a radical change. Something has occurred to induce me to think it possible that those valuables may have been surreptitiously placed in the young woman's trunk by an enemy, on purpose to ruin her."

"By whom, do you suspect?" exclaimed the detective, in astonishment.

"You have perhaps noticed our table and

parlor maid, a rather pretty Irish girl whom we call Maggy?"

"Yes."

"That is the person I suspect."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DETECTIVE EXPERT MAKES A BEGINNING.

"BUT," said the detective, "this is very extraordinary, Miss Hollister."

"It is indeed," was the quiet admission.

"I am disposed to get at the bottom of your suspicion, if you have no objection."

"I desire that you should do so, Mr. Har-joram."

"Upon what general ground do you base your suspicion?"

"Upon a strong motive for the alleged, or supposed, treachery, and that seems to me sufficiently apparent. The servant, Maggy McMann, is in love with young Mr. Baylis, the companion of Miss Forrest's clandestine flight, and doubtless ere this her husband."

"Not so fast there, if you please. We are by no means certain of that."

"What! you can doubt it?"

"I neither doubt nor believe. But if we were deceived in one respect, why not in the other?"

"What do you think of my suspicion of the table-maid's treachery in the case?"

"Nothing, until you can give me something more than vague general grounds for entertaining it. A woman may cherish mere jealous animosity against another without proceeding to murder her reputation in reprisal. You should have more specific grounds to build on."

"Maggy is of a treacherous, implacable nature. Further than that, I don't choose to build on more specific grounds. Will you undertake my commission in the affair, or will you not?"

She looked at him with a cold defiance which she did not altogether feel. When she had necessarily associated with him in the past, as her cousin's boyish chum, there had ever been a species of antagonism between them, in the course of which she had always secretly dreaded the eccentric lad's lynx-like acumen, which had in some way seemed capable of searching her inmost thoughts. And this uneasiness was more or less present with her now, though he might not have suspected it.

"I have already had the honor, Miss Hollister," replied Joram, with his most oily and elaborate politeness, "of answering that question in the affirmative."

"Thanks! I prefer there should be as little delay as possible in your getting to work on the case. When and how shall you make a beginning?"

"That depends."

"On what?"

"On whether I am to act just as I see fit, with absolute independence of your wishes or advice in the matter."

"You are blunt enough."

"I always am when talking business, ma'm."

"Well, then, take a *carte blanche*."

"Good! I shall first follow up your suspicion as to the parlor maid's criminality. As for Miss Forrest, it will be no trouble to find her at any day she may be wanted."

"You speak confidently."

"Not more so than I feel."

"Well, as to the McMann girl first, then."

"Good! Is there any man-servant's place in this establishment vacant?"

"Yes; the place of under-footman, or page, whose duties are wholly indoors."

"Speak a word to your uncle in favor of Joseph Squiggs, who will apply for the place this evening."

"Ah! so that you can have the girl under watch?"

"Yes."

"Is the Joseph Squiggs, who shall apply for the place, a trusted friend of yours?"

"A particularly trusted friend, since he will be no other than myself."

"Ah!"

Avice had given a slight start, while her face, which he was watching furtively, perceptibly changed.

She hadn't thought of having the Detective Expert himself—this matured peccadillo-reader of her childish days—an inmate of her home, and it was the reverse of agreeable.

She accordingly burst into a laugh, and eyed him quizzingly.

"You could never carry it out!" she cried.

"And why not, ma'm?" good-naturedly.

"I don't like being impolite, Rod—Mr. Mar-joram, I should say."

"A cultivated and beautiful woman's chance impoliteness could never trouble me, Avice—Miss Hollister, I should say."

She laughed again.

"A Roland for my Oliver! Well, then, your personal appearance—especially your figure—is scarcely favorable to a successful disguise, in my opinion."

"Leave that to me. That which I shall choose may be penetrable by yourself, since you are forewarned, but to no one else."

"Still, either my uncle or Jack, knowing you so well—"

"Will suspect nothing. Or you can let them into the secret, if you choose."

"No," quickly; "my suspicion of the girl had better remain in confidence between us two, till justified or disproved."

"That is best. The Joseph Squiggs dodge goes, then?"

"Oh, yes, of course!" but with a fleeting reluctance that was not lost upon him. "How long, do you think, will it be necessary to keep it up?"

"Can't say. Perhaps a day, perhaps a fortnight. But you can particularly appropriate my domestic services, you know, which will give me odd opportunities to think of Miss Forrest's whereabouts in the mean time."

"Yes, it all seems very well, though I shall naturally be more or less uncomfortable while it lasts."

"Why? allow me to ask."

"Oh!" a little pettishly; "I naturally so hate intriguing and dissimulation of every sort, you know."

"The deuce you do!" thought Joram to himself. "Then is your nature radically transformed, my beauty, and I'd bet my head that you are systematically deceiving me at this moment."

But he only bowed his head sympathetically, and muttered something of the sad but imperative necessity of fighting fire with fire.

It being thus arranged, he presently took his leave.

She remained sitting for some moments as he had left her, the troubled anxiety, which she had successfully mastered during the interview, slowly deepening in her lovely face.

"A more complicated game than I had anticipated!" she thought. "Still, there is no drawing back, and I must never forget the old Machiavellian Cardinal's injunction: Be bold, and even more bold!"

Going up to her apartments, where the indefatigable Dorton was putting things to rights, the maid ventured to say to her:

"Dear miss, 'ere is your best coral brooch lyin' loose on the dressing-case again. 'Ow would you feel if that should some day turn hup missin', just as your di'mond necklace were?"

"Put it in the jewel-case, my dear, and don't worry," replied Avice, taking up a novel and sinking into her favorite *fauteuil*. "By the way, as soon as you are at liberty I want you to go to my milliner's for me. You can bring me word of her best summer styles, and save me the bore of looking them over."

"Oh, miss! and would I really be hable, you know?"

"Why not? I am sure you have a taste much above your station, my dear."

"If it had only been Dorton, instead of that wretched little leech, Maggy!" Thought Avice, as soon as her maid had departed on the errand. "She is really a good creature, with whom my secret would have been no less safe than with myself, while now—"

Her face hardened ominously, while there was a look not good to see in the flashing black eyes, that resembled nothing so much as a poniard's glint from under their knitted brows. But, she waited patiently.

Presently there was a soft tap on the door. Avice listlessly dropped her book, and assumed her most amiable expression.

"Come in," she called out, sweetly, well knowing who was there before the door opened to admit the McMann girl.

"How glad I am it is you, my dear Maggy!" was the beauty's smiling reception. "Dorton is away, and my head is so hot! Sit down here and brush out my hair."

The mingled obsequiousness and insolence in the girl's face gave way to a look of pleased gratification.

"Oh, miss, there's the parlor and reception-room to be dusted yet; and, besides, I'm afraid I'm not fit."

"Nonsense! Do as I bid you." And then, as Maggy complied: "How would you like to be a lady's maid yourself?"

"Oh, ma'm! if I only had the chance."

"It may come to you sooner than you anticipate. Why," mendaciously, with a heroic masked grimace at an exceptionally awkward dig of the comb in the inexperienced hands, "you are already doing nicely! Besides," confidentially, "now that you are a sharer of my little secrets, it would be all the more natural for your services to be more intimate."

"Oh, ma'm! you are too kind and condescending."

"Not a bit of it; though, of course, in the mean time—till I can make a place for you—you must be specially discreet and reticent, you know."

"Discrete and reticent is it, miss? Faith, an' wild horses c'u'dn't drag out me saycrecy!"

"You are a dear, good girl, Maggy. Ouche!"

"Och, wurra, miss! is it hurtin' of you I am?"

"Only a trifle. Still, you may use the brush now exclusively, by way of a change. There! and what a delicate touch you have, Maggy!"

"Thanks, ma'm! it's me divil's best I'm a-doin'. An' w'u'd I have all your illigant cast-offs, miss, as Dorton has?"

"Of course; but all in good time. Hand me my jewel-box, if you can reach it without getting up."

"This, ma'm?" with an awed look while

transferring the casket—itsself a precious antique of ebony, inlaid with ivory and lapis lazuli—from the dressing-case to the indolent beauty's lap.

"Yes," carelessly betraying the secret of the spring-touch by which the lid was made to fly open, and then listlessly turning over the glittering contents, piece by piece. "Pish! nothing new or fit to wear. Perhaps you care for trinkets more than I, Maggy?"

The dazzled colleen's sole reply was an ecstatic gasp in the affirmative.

"Take this from me," handing her a small but valuable diamond brooch. "But remember now," playfully, "no wearing it about the house, to excite ill-natured comment—not at least until you are my lady's maid."

The girl had dropped comb and brush to grab the gift in her coarse hands.

"Wear it?" she exclaimed, breathlessly. "Och, niver at all at all, m'am, until I c'u'd have the foine gowns to match it!"

"All in good time, my dear," shutting up the casket, and passing it back to its place. "That will do now, Maggy. I will keep my hair loose till Dorton gets back." And she indolently took up her book again.

Looking up a moment later, however, Avice was gratified to perceive the girl still standing midway to the door as if hypnotized, her gloating eyes wandering back and forth from the brooch in her palm to the casket on the bureau.

"Oh, ma'm!"

"Not gone yet, my child? Well, what is it?"

"If I might only be so bowld, miss—"

"Speak out, my dear."

"The brist-pin you have presinted to me, ma'm?"

"Yes?"

"What," in a hushed voice, "what might it be wort', ma'm?"

"Worth? How should I know? Not much, I fancy; a hundred or two, perhaps."

"A hoondred or two?"

"Yes, yes; what of that?"

"Not dollars, ma'm?"

Avice burst into her clear laugh.

"What else, you little goose? Not guineas, at all events. But run along now, and leave me with my book."

Avice was somewhat surprised, though not wholly disagreeably so, by Mr. Hollister bringing Lord Brandymere home to lunch with him.

His lordship was a rather magnificent animal, whose candid admiration Avice might have had more patience with, but for Jack Sterling's having pre-empted the place of honor in her imagination.

Save his use of the monocle, his Britishisms were less numerous and ridiculous than with other importations of his class, a ranching experience in Montana had divested him of somewhat of the wooden and stiff insularity that is so deservedly guyed in the more progressive countries, such as the United States and France, he even seemed capable of appreciating a pretty woman's society while keeping his innate sensuality decently in the background, frankly acknowledged his gambling propensities, and altogether was not bad to take, as an Englishman goes.

"Aw, do you know, Miss Hollister," he remarked while the collation was under way, "I wasn't altogether selfish in accepting your uncle's invitation. Got a brand-new turnout, you must understand—pair of dashing chestnuts fresh from Kentucky, and said to be steppers—and thought you might be induced to take a spin with me behind 'em this afternoon."

"Nothing would please me better, Lord Brandymere," replied Avice, kindly, "but I shall really have to forego the treat. I am an engaged woman now," with a laugh. "What do you think of that?"

His lordship was so taken aback that he dropped his monocle out of its accustomed place in his left eye.

"Bless me! too bad! Might I be so bold, so presuming; you know—"

"Of course, you may. It's my cousin, Jack Sterling."

"Aw! thought that was such an old story as to be a little—aw!—unreal, you know."

"It was a little spun out, as engagements go nowadays," she smilingly admitted. "But everything is definitely settled now. We are to be married in October."

"Aw! congratulations, I'm sure."

After that Lord Brandymere lapsed into comparative silence, though there was an odd look in his face, as much as to say, "Not if I know it," in the occasional devouring glances that he furtively ventured upon thereafter.

If Avice had practiced any self-denial in declining his lordship's amiable courtesy, she was more than compensated by observing Mr. Hollister's hardly disguised delight over her response thereto.

"Uncle," she said, after a pause, "I have recommended to me an excellent man for the under-footman's place so long vacant."

"Ah, have you, my dear? But I was thinking that Barker was getting along pretty swimmingly without an assistant of late."

"What! and the door-bell to be answered by any one who chances to hear it? Besides, I

could make plenty of use of an under-footman on my own account. Dorton must be getting tired of running my errands for me, and I don't blame her."

"We've nine servants already," interposed Mrs. Marjoram, with a solemnity that earned her a sharp look from Avice.

"Oh, just as you wish, my dear child, of course!" Uncle Hal hastened to assent. "Good man, eh?"

"Yes; a Joseph Squiggs, who will make his application to you this evening."

"All right. But if he comes to grief with our chief flunky, Barker—who is something of a bruiser, and jealous at that—he mustn't complain."

"I think the new-comer will manage to take his own part, uncle."

Thus recommended, Joseph Squiggs made his application the forthcoming evening accordingly, and was careful to keep his left hand in his pocket or otherwise out of sight while undergoing inspection.

"Bless me!" was Mr. Hollister's first remark; "why you're as long and lean as Rod Marjoram himself. And but for your florid face and tow-colored hair I'd believe you to be none other than he."

But Joseph Squiggs was forthwith engaged.

CHAPTER XII.

CRAGSBY.

THE next morning at breakfast it was definitely agreed that the household establishment should be transferred to Cragshy for the summer, two days thence.

Barker, who combined the duties of butler and footman in his single personality, on being summoned to receive his instructions accordingly, made his august appearance with a pair of shockingly blackened eyes.

"Why, hallo, Barker!" exclaimed Mr. Hollister, while Jack grinned, and both Avice and Mrs. Marjoram looked up curiously; "have you been sparring with the Nonpareil, or whatever's the matter with you?"

"Oh, no, sir," stammered the chief flunky, who was six foot three, burly in proportion, and with calves that would have discounted the kindred monstrosities on the bronze Benjamin Franklin in Printing House Square, "merely a slight mishunderstanding, sir, with the new man, Mr. Squiggs, which we settled betwixt us in the coach-house this morning, sir."

The old gentleman, who was an honorary member of the New York Athletic Club, gave a short little laugh.

"What, that spindle-shanked starveling?" he cried. "Why, you're big enough to eat him up, man!"

"Yes, sir, may it please you," with a diplomatic cough behind his hand. "Hon'ly, it won't do to halways judge by appearances, Mr. Hollister. If you please, sir, is there any borders?"

"Oh, of course!" with a dry laugh; and the discomfited giant was given his instructions accordingly.

"It's just awful, Uncle Hal!" commented Mrs. Marjoram, when Barker had retired. "And I say it boldly, even if the new man do look enough in shape like my nevy, the detective, to be his twin cousin, that he ought to be discharged on the spot."

"Nonsense, Mrs. Marjoram!" cried the old merchant, heartily. "Doubtless Barker brought on his punishment by uncalled-for insolence to an inferior, and I trust the gruel will agree with him. Jack, have you got your vacation?"

"Yes, uncle; or will have from to-morrow, which is the same thing."

"Well, send in your resignation to the company to-day. There'll be no need for your high-stooling in the future, and Avice and you shall have twenty thousand a year from your wedding-day. Humph!" with mock surliness; "and much good may it do the pair of you."

Jack's face flushed with pleasure, while Avice's eyes sparkled at perceiving his satisfaction.

If he was selling his heart, it could not be denied that he was getting a round price for it; though it is true he had no suspicion that it was but to a dead heart—the mere phantom of a murdered love—that he purposed to dispose of it.

Three days later the removal to Cragshy was effected.

Avice was glad of the change, though there was the probability that her powers for intrigue would thereby be put to the severest test.

For while keeping up some sort of communication with her uncle's secluded colored tenants—whom she had not visited since arranging for Bertha Forrest's abduction, and had only heard from as to the success of her plot through the report of John, the coachman—it would be necessary, at least for awhile, to keep the disguised detective in ignorance of their existence till such time as she should be in readiness to reproduce and vindicate their captive in the web she was systematically weaving for the incontinent destruction of the McMann girl's blackmailing power over herself—a task whose supreme difficulties she did not underrate.

Oh, how bitterly had she bewailed in secret the necessity which had forced her to accede to the suggestion of taking Joram in the bosom of

her uncle's household in this underhand fashion!

If ever man or woman was brought home to the truth contained in the proverbial couplet,

"Oh, what a tangled web we weave
When first we practice to deceive!"

it was experienced daily and hourly by our misguided and beautiful young schemer at this perilous stage of the complication in which she had immeshed herself step by step.

She often surveyed her mirror-image wonderingly, it seemed so strange that these various anxieties should not already be making themselves visible in her face and mien.

To make her position worse, Lord Brandymer came to Cragshy as her uncle's invited guest and others would come after him.

As an illustration of the difficulties that were besetting her, a running account of her second day at the country house is sufficient.

Rising very early, with the intention of slipping off unobserved to the tenant house in the wood, she was in the first place met by the mournful question on the part of Dorton, her maid: "Oh, miss, I really 'ope you're not getting tired of me?"

"Tired of you? Why, what could have put such nonsense in your head, my dear?"

"That hodious bog-trotter, Maggy, ma'm, is beginning to throw out 'ints as 'ow she is to step into my shoes afore a great while—metaphoric speaking, of course, miss, since it's fours I wear, an' I doubt if she could punch 'er toes into the top-leather of a number six to save her Irish life—and that especial since you've taken to makin' such haccount of her, to say nothink of Mr. Squiggs's polite hattendions to that extent as seems to 'ave hactually turned 'er 'ead."

"Think no more of it, Dorton," said Avice, kissing her reassuringly. "If I choose to amuse myself with flattering the vulgar creature's ridiculous vanity, it is my own affair, and nothing to your disadvantage. Only promise to keep your temper and your own counsel in the matter, and you will finally discover that I cannot do enough for you. Have I your promise to this effect now?"

"Ho, yes, miss!" with a brightening face. "As if I wouldn't promise hanythink when you are so sweet and kind, even if am hutterly mystified by it all!"

"That is a good girl. Now I am off for one of my early runs through the woods before the dew is off, that you used to scold me about."

"Not when you 'ad on them 'eavy-soled walkin' shoes, miss; an' neither will the flannel skirt come to 'urt, while haltogether the sailor suit becomes you amazing."

Then on her way through the apple orchard, in order to reach the wood by as circuitous a route as possible, she next encountered Joram himself, who seemed to be waiting for her.

At another time, much as she disliked and dreaded the man personally, she would have welcomed the encounter, for she had had few opportunities to confer with him as yet.

"At last!" she exclaimed, with assumed eagerness. "Have you anything new to report to me, my friend?"

"Only in a general way, miss," replied the pseudo under-footman, "but it's good, so far as it goes. I sort of thought you'd be an early bird this bright morning, and was therefore on the lookout."

"What have you to tell me?"

"Maggy McMann is systematically stealing your jewels, miss—or it looks mighty like it."

"Bless me! are you sure?"

"Well, she's got some of 'em, at all events. I have surprised her gloating over some trinkets of value in secret, and she has confided to me the glowing statement that the man who marries her will be in money-luck."

"I shall examine my jewel-case presently."

"Are you in the habit of leaving it where she might have got at it?"

"I am afraid so. Dorton often accuses me of carelessness in this regard. If Maggy has any of my gems, of course she has stolen them."

"So it would seem."

"Seem? How on earth would she obtain them otherwise?"

"I'm sure I don't know, ma'm."

His beady little eyes were on her in a way the reverse of reassuring, but she was on her guard.

"Well," she continued, "I am glad of this discovery for Miss Forrest's sake, at all events. Don't you think it a confirmation of my suspicion that Maggy may have secreted the bracelet and necklace in Bertha's trunk?"

"Not altogether, miss."

"Tell me what you do think, then."

"Well, if this girl is a thief, she doubtless has been such from the start."

"Yes."

"And if she stole the heirloom and necklace that were found in Miss Forrest's trunk, why would she have put them there, instead of appropriating them to herself, as she has done with these other pilferings—assuming them to be such."

"Do you leave her jealousy of Miss Forrest out of account?"

"I am coming to that. Assuming the jealousy

to have overcome the cupidity in Maggy's nature to the extent you imply, she would have had to obtain access to Miss Forrest's rooms in order to carry out her plot against the young lady's character."

"Why, of course."

"Is it altogether likely that she would even have known where Miss Forrest lived?"

"She could easily have informed herself by common inquiry on that point."

"Is it also likely that, knowing this much, she would have been able to enter Miss Forrest's rooms surreptitiously?"

"A thief can pick a lock."

"A veteran, or expert, thief, yes; but an amateur thief, not always."

"But look here, my friend: what do you think of all this on your own part?"

"I am still only forming an opinion."

"Well, you know what I want. My chief and haunting desire is to clear Miss Forrest's character. Furnish me with convincing proofs that Maggy McMann has been systematically robbing my jewel-box, and I will attend to the rest."

"I am subject to your command in the matter, Miss Hollister."

"Don't talk in that way, Mr. Marjoram. When do you think you can satisfy me on this point of the McMann girl's dishonesty?"

"It is now Tuesday; before the end of the week, then."

"That will do. And you will then turn your attention to discovering Miss Forrest's whereabouts?"

"Yes, miss,"—adding under his breath, "if not before."

"That is well."

And, as he went back in the direction of the house, she tripped away with a lightness of step in odd keeping with her heaviness of spirit.

"What infatuation could have induced me to place that man at my elbow?" she complained to herself for perhaps the hundredth time. "I am but a tyro in this sort of thing, compared with him. Ah, that one misfortune of Maggy McMann's eavesdropping!"

Her hand closed convulsively, as if upon the hilt of an invisible poniard, and, with a stamp of her foot, she hurried on.

"Ha, ha, ha!" upon his own part, chuckled the Expert, to himself, while making a detour that enabled him to keep Avice in sight while stealthily following her at a distance. "Does she really imagine that she can beat me?"

The wood belonging to Mr. Hollister's Hudson River estate was of immense value by reason of the great tract, several hundred acres in extent, which it covered, and its villa surrounded location. It was already appraised into the millions, was of course constantly appreciating in value, and was constantly still held on to by its good-natured proprietor with the complacent rapacity which is such a distinguishing characteristic of the genial dog-in-the-manger land barons of our vaunted democratic commonwealths.

It was so wild and unfrequented as to afford excellent covers for game, that was never hunted or trapped save by chance Gypsies, boy poachers and the like; it was doubtful if Mr. Hollister himself had a better approximate notion of the extent of the tract than he had of its rising value and desirableness from year to year; and for a number of years past he had only had a nominal acquaintance with the inmates of its one secluded tenant-house, the negro couple, Old Sam and Old Kate, whose surname was Simpson, to whom the reader has already been briefly introduced. That they paid their meager rent with more or less promptness to his gardener, in charge of Cragshy Manor and Park, and in some way eked out a livelihood by hunting, fishing, laundry work and odd jobs, was all he knew or cared.

To Avice, however, who had wandered at will about the woods from her earliest girlhood, the colored couple, apart from the fact of the woman having nursed her, were naturally much more familiarly known, and they had latterly come, through many off-hand kindnesses received at her hands, to regard themselves as under special protection. The same might be said of Jack Sterling, but that he had detected the couple in several acts of dishonesty—for neither was any better than a thief on occasion—after which he had ceased to patronize them, and of late years, indeed, had all but forgot their existence.

But, it was far otherwise with Avice, who had a good deal of the Gypsy in her moral composition.

It was therefore with a good deal of assurance that she threaded the gloomy and tangled paths leading in the direction of the wood-buried tenant house, altogether unsuspecting of Joram being on her track; and yet, it was not without a certain anxious curiosity, too, inasmuch as she had received no word from the couple, beyond the mere fact of the young needlewoman being within their toils, since the abduction of more than a week previous.

Was Bertha still a prisoner in the old house? If so, was it as a willing or a discontented captive? Was Baylis still with her? And might he have succeeded in so making his peace with her as to have already become her husband?

But no; this last hope was too desirable for realization; though the self-query evolving it was none the less present in Avice's thoughts than the many others that kept it confused company there as she hurried through the wood.

At last she recognized her proximity to the house, and was proceeding with more caution when she suddenly became aware of a soft voice, apparently in the occupation of reading aloud.

A moment later, to her no little astonishment, she perceived Bertha Forrest seated at the gnarled foot of an old oak in a pretty little dingle, where she was reading from Tennyson in a soft, dreamy but intense voice that was a fit exponent of her deep interest in the poetry!

Moreover, though appearing a little more serious than was her wont, she was looking remarkably well—just the reverse, in fact, of what would be anticipated of a fretful or pining captive in distress.

Noiselessly skirting the dingle, Avice presently came in sight of the house, and signaled the old couple, both of whom chanced to be on view, to come to her.

They came hurrying to her side with the most exuberant expressions, which she speedily cut short by saying:

"Then you haven't found it necessary to restrain the young lady of her liberty, it seems?"

"Oh, bless you, no, miss!" exclaimed Old Sam, with a guffaw; "de young leddy, why, you couldn't hire her to run away from dis haben ob peace!"

CHAPTER XIII.

AN INVESTIGATOR INVESTIGATED.

"PERHAPS she has married Mr. Baylis, then?" demanded Avice, eagerly.

Then both the Simpsons went off into a series of chuckling guffaws over the absurdity of such a thing.

"What! dat Marse Baylis?" cried Old Kate, holding her 'at sides, while her sable partner grinningly shook his head from side to side. "Oh, he am only de fetch an' carry fo' Miss Forrest! Dat young leddy hab de heart somewhere else, honey."

"But isn't the young man also living here with you?"

"Not much, honey. He hang out at Tarrytown somewhar, dough he done bring de young missus books, an' order t'ings nigh onto ebery day."

Avice had just about fully mastered the situation as to the fact of Bertha's strange content with her surroundings, but with only vague conjectures as to its significance, when young Mr. Baylis was seen approaching the house.

He carried some books and what appeared to be a roll of music under his arm, and Avice's conscience was not without a twinge at perceiving how thin, pale and hopelessly saddened he had become.

"Bring him here to me in this place," she said, peremptorily. Of course, Miss Forrest must not suspect my being in the vicinity."

This was done, after which the old couple returned to the house-yard to be in readiness for Bertha's reception, should she come back from her reading unexpectedly.

If it were possible for a man to hate the sight of so beautiful a young woman, there was positive hatred, not unmixed with troubled alarm, in the glance with which the young Englishman returned Avice Hollister's eager look of inquiry as he found himself alone with her.

"Ah!" he said, gloomily; "I suppose you are then at the great house for the summer, Miss Hollister?"

"Yes, since day before yesterday. How do you progress with your wooing, my friend?"

"I am not your friend, and you are not mine, Miss Hollister," was the moody reply, as he seated himself hopelessly on a fallen tree. "One doesn't ruin or torture one's friends. As for my wooing, I hardly know what you mean. A fellow doesn't woo much where he isn't loved, you know—that is, unless he is a scoundrel; and I have never been that, even if I was dishonest once."

"Oh, come!" she said, gently; "you are taking too hopeless a view of things, that is quite evident."

"I don't agree with you, miss. I was a sort of half-happy fool before you made me do this thing, and now I am simply a duped and miserable fool—that is all. Oh!" desperately, and striking his forehead; "why did I not go at once to Mr. Hollister and tell him my fault like a man, be the consequences what they might?"

"Ah!" coldly; "but you did not."

"No!" bitterly; "I preferred the part of a sneak and a coward."

"Put it better for yourself than that. You preferred my—protection to disgrace."

"Ha, ha, ha!"

"No more of this, I am here for information."

"Oh, well, miss!" with mock abjectness; "of course, I'm obedient, you know."

"It is well that you are. If Miss Forrest continues to hate you, as you would have me infer, why do I find her so oddly content with what was meant to be her compulsory seclusion here?"

"She doesn't hate me, ma'm," half-angrily.

"Unlike some others, I don't believe she could hate anybody or anything. She is too good and too noble. She simply doesn't love me. And I suppose she philosophically accepts her lot here out of curiosity, and perhaps because she loves the beautiful green solitudes hereabouts. Besides, the old thief of a negro and his wife are sufficiently kind to her. If they weren't, I'd know the reason why mighty quick, let me tell you!"

"Curiosity, you said? Curiosity as to what?"

"Oh, how should I know exactly? Curiosity, perhaps, to know how far your spite against her can go, and to know if Jack Sterling's professed love for her shall stand the test."

"Indeed! Then Miss Forrest knows of my having instigated her abduction?"

"Miss Forrest," looking her steadily in the eyes, "knows everything that I could tell her—and perhaps more, too."

"How more?"

"Miss Forrest is intelligent and she is intuitive; she probably, of her own accord, understands you, Miss Hollister, pretty thoroughly by this time, and what you are capable of."

Avice bit her lip; but what she heard was no more than she had a right to expect.

"What did Miss Forrest say," she demanded sharply, "to the pieces of jewelry being found in her trunk?"

"Oh, what could she say or do, other than being shocked and grieved?" impatiently. "Why don't you ask her yourself? Of course, she knew that you had put them there."

"How dare you say such a thing?" cried Avice, furiously. "The idea!"

"Oh, I don't say it."

"How dare she, then?"

"I didn't say she said it—only that she knew it."

"But she couldn't know it," vehemently; "she shouldn't dare to think me capable of such a thing! What is that?" in a startled tone.

The Detective Expert, who was placidly eavesdropping in the vicinity, had made a rustling movement that was near to betraying him, but the alarm passed off.

CHAPTER XIV.

AVICE'S BAD MORNING.

"WELL, Miss Hollister," said young Mr. Baylis, slowly, and once more looking at her with his unpleasant steadfastness, "tell me this, then, if you please: do you really expect me to believe that Bertha Forrest is a thief?"

"No, I do not," was the now composed reply. "And neither do I believe it of her now. In the matter of the jewels, I believe her to have been the victim of a certain person's treachery, which is now being investigated. But I shall not speak more of that at present," dismissing his surprised look of inquiry with an abrupt gesture. "Tell me this, though: Does Miss Forrest suspect this retreat to be in the vicinity of Craggsby?"

"She doesn't suspect, but *knows* it, for I told her so, as a matter of course."

"Indeed?"

"Oh, frown if you choose, miss. My deception of Miss Forrest ended with her arrival at this place."

"Do you forget that you are—that it is perhaps not best for you to aggravate me?"

"Why didn't you finish with 'in my power,' as you began, ma'm. Well, I don't much care any more whether I am or not. Do your worst!"

"You are a poor, pitiful fellow, or you would have had that girl your wife by this time!"

"I am a poor, pitiful fellow, I grant you, that I was ever pusillanimous and cowardly enough to submit to the whip-hand of an unprincipled and heartless girl, such as you are, for all your superlative beauty, ma'm! But, beware! It will all recoil upon you! You already feel your insecurity, I am certain of it."

Avice compressed her lips. Did he not speak the truth, and had she not been distrusting herself even for days? However, there was now nothing for it but to go on.

"Mr. Baylis," said she, quietly, "I do not wish Miss Forrest to know—not yet, at least—of my having been here this morning, or of our being already installed at Craggsby."

"Do you make this wish of yours known to me as an order, Miss Hollister, or as a request?"

"As a request," after a slight pause.

"It shall then be as you wish."

She thanked him, and then hurriedly retraced her path through the wood.

The listening Detective Expert hesitated a moment as to whether he should follow her, or seek an interview on the spot with Miss Forrest.

"Better be sure first," he said to himself; and forthwith again took up his shadowing of the *intriguante*.

"Something must be done without delay," thought Avice, as she hurried away. "Baylis is evidently lost to me. I must get Jack away with me somewhere. However, why should I fear? Has he not already given her up? And whatever exposure should come for me in his eyes, my uncle, who holds the all-conquering purse-strings, would never believe me other than his darling."

But she had to confess to herself that it had

thus far been a bad morning for her, with the breakfast hour still in the prospective at that.

But when is there a generally bad day without a tantalizingly relieving ray or two, if but to make the exceeding vexation more bitter and more deep.

As she issued out of the wood into the comparatively open orchard, looking incomparably lovely and oread-like, with the flush of excitement and of swift walking in her dark cheeks and glowing eyes, Lord Brandymere and Jack Sterling, who chanced to be taking the morning air thereabouts as an appetizer, looked up in surprise, while the Englishman impulsively sprang forward, with greeting on his tongue and involuntary admiration in his extended hand and shining gray eyes.

Avice responded becomingly, and with a swift sensation of joy, that was her one emotional red letter in her anxious and unhappy morning, for—Jack had for an instant betrayed himself by a look of furious jealousy, partly concealed, but none the less undeniable.

To have and really know Jack to be jealous on her account! Hosanna! the joy, the compensation, the content of it. She went on to the house with smiling unreality, and replying to Lord Brandymere's rather vapid compliments as in a dream.

His lordship had only arrived late on the preceding evening, at Uncle Hal's special invitation. And at breakfast the old gentleman rather gleefully announced that he had hired a rich neighbor's steam yacht, the *Wanderer*, for the season.

"We shall go fishing any day we like," he said. "I propose to-morrow as a starter, and we can take a preliminary sail over to the Nyack bluffs some time to-day, to see how the black bass are running. What do you say, Blackmere?"

"Shall be delighted, sir," was the reply.

"Aw! fishing is one of my fads, you know."

Jack also seemed agreeable to the proposition, though Avice was less enthusiastic.

"Why, what use can you make of the *Wanderer* for the entire season, uncle?" she exclaimed. "I was already beginning to plan for either Newport or Saratoga, and in short order at that."

"You surprise me, my dear," returned the old gentleman. "What's the matter with Craggsby here for an uninterrupted month or two at least, as heretofore?"

Craggsby for a straight-out month or two, and with the accusing phantom of Bertha Forrest's wrongs at the Simpson cottage, less than a mile away! The very idea was enough to throw Avice into a fever. But her objections were of a necessity guarded and vague, and therefore the more easily disposed of.

All this is very absurd, my dear girl," observed Mr. Hollister at last. "We have not come to Craggsby merely to run away from it. Hurry up with your invitations for your accustomed city guests, and you'll be contented here as much as ever you were."

"Of course she will," interposed Jack. "I shall show Lord Brandymere the shooting-range this morning, and, as for our bowling-alley and tennis court, there are no better anywhere."

Avice accordingly held her peace for the time being, though with no mitigation of the secret anxiety that haunted her.

A little later on she came upon Mrs. Marjoram, who was taking Maggy McMann to task for neglectfulness in one of the newly renovated drawing-rooms, while the girl was disposed to be disrespectful.

"Am I lazy, Miss Avice?" cried the maid, boldly appealing from one of the housekeeper's charges. "For it's just that I'm accused of, in-dade?"

"I didn't say you were lazy, but neglectful!" angrily interposed the housekeeper. "Mend your ways, or you shall hear from me again."

Avice was already exasperated to desperation with the girl's vulgar and growing insolence.

Therefore, when another retort seemed imminent, she said, coldly:

"You needn't appeal to me, Maggy. Mrs. Marjoram is your superior."

The girl held her tongue, but shot out a furiously resentful glance in response, which seemed to complete Mrs. Marjoram's mystification.

There was nothing for it but to expedite Maggy's squelching.

Avice went directly to her room. A few moments later Dorton came running down into the drawing-room, where the disputants were still together.

"Oh, ma'm!" she exclaimed; "Miss 'Ollister's jewel-case 'as been robbed of a diamond brooch, and other things; and"—she turned and looked at the parlor-maid with a suspicious, half-spiteful stare.

Maggy had looked up blankly, feather-duster in hand, while Mrs. Marjoram was scarcely less astounded.

At this moment Avice herself, who had called "John Squiggs" to her aid, abruptly re-entered the room.

"Is that the girl you accuse?" she harshly exclaimed, pointing to Maggy.

The disguised detective nodded.

"She has certainly some valuable jewels in her possession," he replied, in his natural tone of voice, which was enough to complete the housekeeper's mystification. "I have more than once detected her looking them over in secret."

"Let her trunk be searched this instant. If any of my property is found with her effects, she is unquestionably a thief."

The girl who had seemed paralyzed for the moment, now bounded toward the door, but was sternly interrupted by the detective, who grasped her wrist.

"Leave go of me, Squiggs!" she screamed, in a sudden frenzy of terror and bewilderment. "What do you mean?"

"It is not Squiggs, but Mr. Marjoram, the detective," said Avie. "Your guilty looks, Maggy, should explain to you why I have introduced him into our household. If it was you, also, who stole the ornaments that were found in Miss Forrest's trunk, you might as well make a clean breast of it at once."

Mr. Hollister had also appeared upon the scene as she began speaking.

"Bless me!" he exclaimed. "Squiggs and Rod Marjoram one and the same?"

"My neevy, the detective?" gasped the housekeeper, her eyes glistening.

Avie acquainted her uncle in a few words with the situation.

"What!" cried Mr. Hollister, with a joyous enthusiasm that was less intelligible to Avie than the detective; "there is really a chance of proving Miss Forrest's innocence, then?"

"It is solely that for which I have been intriguing, uncle," replied Avie. "I had been missing my jewelry, piece by piece, you see, and if this girl turns out to be the purloiner, it will stand to reason that she made Miss Forrest the victim of her treacherous trick—perhaps out of jealousy over young Mr. Baylis, your secretary."

"It is false!" yelled the entrapped Maggy. "I've took no jewelry but what Miss Avie gave me as prisents."

Avie turned upon her in well-acted blank amazement.

"I give the like of you my jewelry?" she exclaimed.

"You know you did," wailed the girl. "But I see it all now; it's a thrap for me—a thrap to shield yourself from my giving away your say-crets! Och, but it's the beautiful devil that ye air, miss! Bad 'cess to me when I discovered that it was yourself that plotted wid Misther Baylis for the abdoction of the poor young needlewoman."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Avie; "you are beside yourself. What can it all mean?"

"Take her away!" said Mr. Hollister, peremptorily. "This is altogether too absurd. Here, Barker," to the butler, who at this moment wonderingly looked in at the door, "go with—with Squiggs—ha, ha, ha!—and see if this girl is really a thief or not. Settle the matter at once."

Maggy was dragged away, and in a few minutes it was generally known that the missing jewelry had been found in her trunk; soon after which she was given in charge of a village constable, summoned for the purpose.

Jack Sterling, who was at the stables with Lord Brandymere, did not learn of the occurrence, with its accompanying revelation, until some time later.

But while the household excitement over the unhappy parlor-maid's exposure and arrest was at its height, Avie and the housekeeper surprised Mr. Hollister in the act of executing an impromptu *pas seul*, of a hornpipe or cancan variety, it would have been difficult to say which, in the library.

"Why, uncle, what can have come over you?" exclaimed Avie, in unaffected astonishment. "Do you forget your gout?"

"To the deuce with the gout, my dear!" was the beaming response, with but little modification of the capering fit. "Miss Forrest is cleared—that is enough for me! Joram shall hunt her up, my dear—the wrong shall be righted—it is only as our honored guest that she shall come to us again! Ta-ta!"

Mrs. Marjoram's fat face wore a longer expression than it had known for many a day, for she had been secretly cherishing the hope of being Mrs. Henry Hollister No. 2 for the past twenty odd years. And Avie, on her part, was scarcely less startled and dumfounded by this unexpected revelation of Uncle Hal's inclinations.

CHAPTER XV.

THE DETECTIVE EXPERT'S DAY.

"ROD, you rogue! look here!"

It was Mr. Hollister's voice calling after Joram, as the latter was about disappearing in the wood by the orchard path early in the afternoon of the same day.

Joram respectfully waited till he was overtaken by the old gentleman, who found this his first opportunity to speak with him in private since the incident of the morning.

"So, you rascal!" continued Mr. Hollister, good-naturedly; "this is a pretty piece of deception you have been playing on me at Avvy's suggestion."

"I hope you consider it to have all been for the best, sir."

"Gad! I should say so! A cunning little cut-diamond, that niece of mine! And, to think of her plotting all this for the vindication of the poor girl whom she had unwittingly wronged! But, look you, my boy: have you done nothing toward finding out Miss Forrest's whereabouts for me at all as yet?"

"I have neglected nothing, sir, and will probably be able to report success sooner than you anticipate."

"Good! The girl must be righted in short order, you know. And, as for the possibility of her having married young Baylis—" The old gentleman stamped his foot impatiently, and frowned.

"Dismiss the idea from your mind, sir," said the detective. "Not the barest possibility of such a thing!"

"Ha! you speak confidently."

"No more so than I feel, sir. Leave it all to me, and let me retain my incognito here for a day or two longer. That is all I ask."

And with that the expert slipped away into the wood with a respectful wriggle, as you might say, of his serpentine shape, leaving the proprietor of Craggsby in a decidedly agreeable frame of mind.

He had not proceeded far before he surprised a confidential colloquy that Miss Hollister and Jack Sterling were having at the foot of a gigantic old oak, around whose knotted knees a picturesque rustic seat was constructed, a pretty little spring of water bubbling out of the mossy turf near at hand.

"See, Jack!" Avie was saying, while bending over the arm of the bench; "there are our initials twined in the monogram, just as you cut them with your new birthday knife so many years ago."

"That is so, Avvy," and his head nearly touched hers as he briefly inspected the carving.

She looked up with a sweet laugh, her lovely face aglow, her eyes dancing.

"Jack, you made me really happy this morning."

"I? when? how?"

"Yes, you; there in the orchard; and by being jealous of Lord Brandymere."

"Nonsense!"

"Confess that you were, now."

"Well—ur—why should the heavy fellow hang about you so provokingly, anyway?"

"I don't know; but confess outright that you were jealous, Jack."

"But what an absurdity, my dear!" and he laughingly started away. "But really, you know, I must see if the Wanderer is ready for our afternoon sail."

"Wait! confess it first."

"Some other time."

"Look you, then, Jack," she was playfully, yet anxiously, detaining him. "This is our old-time oak-tree tryst—you remember it?"

"Of course."

"How as boy and girl we used to meet here by moonlight, Jack."

"To be sure; but then," glancing at his watch, "really, my dear cousin—"

"One minute more! The nights are moonlight now, Jack. Promise to meet me here at nine this evening."

"What a notion!"

"Promise!—it is my caprice."

"To have me bring Brandymere with me?"

"At your peril!—Promise!"

"Why, of course, my dear! Run to the house now and be at the dock on time." And, with a careless kiss, he hurried away.

She remained looking after him with her soul in her face, and yet without a perceptible flutter of her pulses.

She placed her hand to her heart with a curious movement.

"How strange!" she murmured. "Dead, absolutely dead, here, and yet to hunger for him as I do! Have we, indeed, dual natures, we women, I wonder—the one wholly of the emotions, the other as solely of the spirit and the coarser senses combined? If not, why is it I can only crave, but no longer love? That my imagination can be glorified, while yet my heart—"

With a fierce, all but frenzied, gesture, she went away with a hurried step.

The Detective Expert, upon whom nothing had been lost, thoughtfully proceeded on his way, taking the intricate path leading to the Simpson cottage, with which she had unawares made him acquainted.

"I thought I knew men and women pretty well," he cogitated, "but this woman beats me out. I wonder if there is anything the matter with her heart, anyway? She had plenty of it as a girl—and a deuced hot and passionate heart, into the bargain—but now—somehow she gives me the impression of a sort of animated statue—of the fire of life, without its blood. Plague take me if I couldn't pity her if she deserved it, but she doesn't!" And with an extra pursing of his queer brows, he pushed on.

The sound of voices presently drew him toward the little glade in which Bertha had been observed reading aloud from her Tennyson in the morning.

She was there again, and now in the act of saying good-by to young Baylis.

"Good-by, Tom," she was saying. "You will come again to-morrow, then?"

"Good-by, Bertha! Of course, I will come," with a sigh. "What else can I do so long as you persist in remaining buried away in this hole in the woods?"

She made no reply, but looked out at him with sad seriousness, as he respectfully raised her hand to his lips and then dejectedly strode away.

Joram waited a few moments, and then leisurely disclosed himself.

Bertha looked up from the book in her lap, surveying him with curiosity, but without a particle of alarm.

In spite of his unprepossessing appearance, the detective had the faculty of "getting on" with women on a very slight acquaintance.

"Miss Forrest, how do you do?" he said, complacently seating himself at the other end of the little natural seat of turf which she occupied at the foot of a fine chestnut tree. "Our acquaintance in the past has been a passing one, but," with a genial smile, "I am really glad to see you looking so well."

"What a queer-looking man," thought the young woman; though she only said, composedly: "I think you have the advantage of me, sir."

"That is because I'm sort of disguised," with a genial smile. "You've seen me once or twice at Mr. Hollister's in the city. I'm Mrs. Marjoram's 'neevy, the detective.'"

"Why, so you are!" cried Bertha, smiling. "How odd! And pray, sir, why are you in disguise?"

"I'm on a case, you see," confidentially.

"What case, pray?"

"Yours, ma'am."

Her surprised look gave way to one of trouble, if not of alarm.

"Is it possible, sir," constrainedly, "that—that Miss Hollister still pretends to think that I secreted the things which it seems you found in my trunk?"

"Bosh! No one thinks that of you now, if any one ever did, which I doubt. Real culprit discovered, you see."

"What?"

"Yes; some one stole em', it seems, and put 'em where they were found on purpose to ruin you."

"I have understood that from the start. But, who can have done this?"

"Parlor maid, pretty Irish girl, Maggy McMann. Was in love with the fellow you ran off with, you know. Jealousy, feminine resentment, and all that sort of thing. That is the theory, miss."

"Is it, indeed?" cried Miss Forrest, incredulously. "Then it is simply and laughably preposterous!"

"Eh?"

"Oh, it is too ridiculous! And pray at whose instance has this wonderful theory been advanced?"

"At Miss Hollister's."

"Ah, I thought as much!" and Bertha at once grew cold and grave. "Pray, say no more, if you please."

"But, I'm here for the express purpose of saying a good deal more, my dear young lady. Listen to me!" And he forthwith gave the entire McMann episode, as it may be called, from beginning to end.

"It's a shameful muddle, sir," said Miss Forrest, after a long pause. "I never ran away with Mr. Baylis, in the first place. Miss Hollister herself plotted my abduction at his hands. If you want further proof to that effect, cross-examine Mr. Baylis himself, Mr. Hollister's coachman, or even the rascally old colored couple over yonder, with whom Miss Hollister prearranged everything for my reception here, and even for my detention by force, should it have become necessary."

"This is really astonishing!"

"You find it so? As to the poor Irish maid plotting or designing the treachery that was practiced against me, it is simply absurd. She could not have known where I lived; if she was really and jealously in love with Mr. Baylis, which I greatly doubt, she must have seen that the young man was nothing to me; and—but really it is too ridiculous to be considered in detail."

"How do you account for this morning's proofs of her having robbed Miss Hollister's jewel-box?"

"They were not proofs, and I don't believe the girl could have stolen the things."

"How?"

"I don't care to say anything more."

"Could Miss Hollister have given them to her, as the girl asserts?"

"Far more likely that than that she stole them."

"But Miss Hollister says—"

"I shall listen to nothing more of it, sir."

"Miss Forrest, can you imagine why I am here now?"

"No, sir."

"I am severally commissioned by three persons to discover your whereabouts, neither one of whom is probably aware of my similar employment by the others."

"Who are the three persons?"

"Miss Hollister, Jack Sterling, and Mr. Hollister, their uncle."

"This is surprising! As for Miss Hollister, her commission was given merely to deceive you." (The detective nodded). "Mr. Sterling's anxiety," with a maidenly blush, "I can sufficiently understand. But why Mr. Hollister himself should personally and privately concern himself with regard to my whereabouts or—"

"Pardon me for interrupting you, my dear young lady. The old gentleman's concern regarding you was at first incomprehensible even to me, though it is no longer so. His is the only honest and genuine interest, from among the trio, that is manifested in your behalf."

"But why?"

"May I speak with perfect plainness?"

"I beg it of you, sir."

"He loves you."

"Mr. Hollister—Jack's uncle?" in amazement.

"Honestly and worthily."

Bertha at first seemed disposed to laugh, but quickly became serious.

"This is very remarkable, sir!" she exclaimed.

"I do not think so. Miss Forrest, I am taking a greater interest in you than I have ever taken in any young woman, save in the girl who did me the honor to become my wife. To win your confidence, I shall tell you why. I had a sister of about your age at the time of her death, and not dissimilar to you in appearance and modest prettiness. This may seem incredible in view of my own hideous ungainliness—my associates call me, not inaptly, you should know, Three-fingered Joram, the Detective Expert—a highly complimentary characterization, as you must allow, but it is none the less true. My only sister, and how I loved her! She had a pretty name, too—Vera, which perhaps means truth, of which she was the personification and exponent. My friend, the little Vera died of a broken heart and a trampled soul, shame-blasted, the victim of a rich and profligate devil in the human form! Do not interrupt me quite yet, if you please, though I thank you for that tear! What though I hunted him down and killed him—a deed for which the world, with this single exception I am making of yourself, has never been the wiser! Could that right the wronged, make clear the dimmed brightness, restore to me the lost? My story is done. Can you believe and trust in me, my friend?"

"I can and shall do so, sir," replied Bertha, with emotion. "I have known little of you heretofore; I am glad to know you better now."

"Thank you! Will you be guided by me implicitly?"

"I will," after a pause.

"Listen; Miss Hollister's hostility to you is sufficiently patent; Jack Sterling's unworthiness of your devotion is yet to be proved. Don't interrupt quite yet, please. Mr. Hollister is old enough to be your grandfather, but his affection for you is disinterested and noble. As to the proof of Jack's unworthiness, hold yourself in readiness for a stroll with me at eight o'clock this evening. Furthermore, when you see Mr. Baylis again, tell him you wish him to accompany you on a fishing excursion to-morrow morning. I shall have a boat in readiness, and will complete the other arrangements. Do you assent to all this?"

"Yes," she replied, after another reflective pause; and she trustingly gave him her hand; after which they separated.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE OAK TREE TRYST.

THE Hollister party having gone on their preliminary sail in the Wanderer, Joram had but little difficulty in keeping out of the way of more or less embarrassing inquisitiveness for the remainder of the day.

But an unforeseen difficulty was apparent when he presented himself to Miss Forrest in her little reading nook, as it might be called, at the appointed hour.

The young woman's face was seen to be troubled and pale in the uncertain light given by the newly risen moon among the trees.

"If this excursion is to be kept a secret from Miss Hollister," she said, in a low and guarded voice, "I am afraid, Mr. Marjoram, that I cannot go with you."

"Why?"

"The Simpsons are, after a fashion, my jailers, you know. They have strongly dissented from permitting me my liberty of the wood after nightfall, and are probably even now keeping me secretly under watch. Should I insist on accompanying you, Miss Hollister will doubtless receive early notification to that effect."

"Humph! Leave this to me. I was, fortunately, Jack Sterling's chum hereabouts of old, as you may have guessed, and these colored worthies are by no means unknown to me."

He peered into an adjacent clump, advanced a step, and called out, sharply and commandingly: "Sam! Kate! come here, both of you!"

There being no answering word or movement,

he called out again: "Here, you two! do you want me to summon the ghost of the drowned convict whose body you robbed at the water's edge ten years ago? Or will you come to me without its aid?"

There was a husky sort of gasp, and then the old dorky, followed by his fat consort, came tottering out of the thicket into the open and comparatively lighted space.

The knees of both were knocking together, while their dusky faces betrayed the most abject terror.

"Fore de Lawd! eff it ain't Masse Rod Marj'ram, growed up, an' wif him black ha'r turned red," faltered Old Sam. "Oh, Marse Rod, we nobber did rob dat striped-dressed body, 'deed we nebber did! but doan't let him ghost come ag'in—please doan't, Marse Rod!"

"I c'u'dn't stan' it, I done know I c'u'dn't!" whined the old yellow woman. "Don't rake up de dead man ag'in, Marse Rod! Bress you, we'm honest now, bofe me an' Sam; I swan to golly we am, Marse Rod."

"Hold your jaws, both of you!" commanded the detective, sternly. His lathy, elongated figure appeared Mephistophelean and weird in the moonlight. "You do not doubt my ability to call up the convict's ghost on occasion, I suppose?"

No; they seemed to have no doubt of it whatever, and were accordingly dismissed, upon their terrified promise of non-interference and secrecy as to Miss Forrest's movements in the future, which there did not seem much likelihood of their disregarding.

"That ghost business," the detective explained, as he set out to pilot his fair companion through the wood, "is no less efficacious now than of old with that rascally couple, it seems. It is now something over ten years ago that the incident occurred which gave rise to it, Jack and I being then having our vacation at Craggsby. A convict had effected his escape from up the river at Sing Sing, and subsequently assaulted and robbed a peddler of thirty dollars. Doubtless the chief intention of the assault was to exchange his prison stripes for his victim's garments, but he was frightened away, and the hue and cry given, before he could more than appropriate the wallet of money. His drowned body was first found the following morning by the Simpson couple at the river's edge just beyond the Hudson River Railroad tracks; and the supposition was that they in turn despoiled the body of the peddler's wallet, but it could never be traced to them. After that Jack and I nearly scared the couple out of their wits by improvising a ghost in convict's garb; and it seems that the lesson has retained its place in their superstitions to the present day."

This was somewhat interesting in itself. But, after the pair had proceeded a considerable distance through the wood, Bertha, who had been manifesting more or less irresolution from time to time, at last came to a pause in a little glade.

"Mr. Marjoram," she said, "I should not have accompanied you at all, without some more definite information of your object this evening."

"Time enough to make everything clear," cheerfully replied Joram, while spreading his handkerchief over a fallen tree. "Sit here and rest yourself, my friend. Now," as she complied, and he seated himself in an off-hand, fraternal way at her side, "what is it that I should make plainer to you, Miss Forrest?"

"You propose to afford me evidence that Mr. Sterling is not worthy the—the attachment he has inspired in me?"

"I do."

"In what way would you furnish me this evidence, sir?"

"Listen; Jack's fear of beggary has already proved stronger than his love for you. Several days ago, with his fullest consent—or at least without demur on his part—the old engagement between him and his cousin was formally ratified in Mr. Hollister's presence. Since then it has been made public, and the wedding is fixed for next October."

"Ah!" It was a low but painful little exclamation, and she had grown very white; but she signed him to go on.

"This is not all," continued the detective. "Jack is also fickle. In your absence, Miss Hollister's personal attractions—which you will perhaps acknowledge to be something beyond the ordinary run—"

"Avice Hollister is the most beautiful creature I ever saw," parenthesized Miss Forrest, with mournful simplicity.

"Granted in the abstract, though she isn't of my sort. Well, her attractions can still fascinate him in your absence. They have an appointment for this evening at an old-time boy-and-girl rendezvous of theirs, a place called the Oak-tree Tryst. I propose to have you witness and overhear this interview as a proof that Jack Sterling should be nothing more to you."

"I have never yet played the spy or eavesdropper in my life."

"You've a perfect right to in sheer self-defense. That," firmly, "is why I am going to have you enact this part to-night."

"I don't know about that," bewilderedly. "I

—I—I do want to know the truth; and yet I—I am afraid I haven't the courage to acquire it." Her head drooped on her breast, which was heaving painfully.

"No doubt of the heart business in this case!" thought the detective, observing her compassionately. "That lovely she-devil, Avice Hollister, would find more difficulty in murdering the emotional fountain-seat here than she had in her own case."

"I understand," he said, gently. "But this is something that you ought to know of your own knowledge."

"Perhaps so," strugglingly; and then, after a hesitating pause, and with some abruptness: "Why should you be so desirous to have me undeceived, Mr. Marjoram?"

"To give old Hollister a fair chance at you," was the prompt reply, "and thus insure your happy and secure establishment for life."

"Old Mr. Hollister, indeed!"

"Well, then, it is a good thing for you to be undeceived on general principles."

"Yes," slowly.

"I see you are turning over another objection in your mind. Shall I tell you what it is?"

"If you can."

"You are wondering how to reconcile my present proposition with what might be thought due from me to Jack Sterling on the score of old friendship."

"That is just it."

"You can have my justification in a nutshell. As between the fair and chivalrous thing in behalf of a wronged and defenseless young woman, and fidelity to a friend in his cowardly wrongdoing, I unhesitatingly choose the former part. Had Jack come to me directly after the ratifying his engagement with Avice Hollister, and said: 'Look here, I want you to discover Bertha Forrest for me in order that I may frankly tell her that I have not the courage to choose her and poverty, as against Avice Hollister and financial abundance,' it would have been enough. But he did nothing of the kind. Face to face, and from his own lips, you will never know what he is; I intend that you shall learn it behind his back. Are you sufficiently answered?"

"Yes," replied the young woman, rising slowly; and they resumed their devious course through the wood.

Approaching the Trysting-Oak, Avice Hollister's voice was heard in passionate tones.

The detective touched his companion's arm warningly, and as they ensconced themselves near at hand, a strangely dramatic scene was before them.

Partly shaded by the great oak, there stood Jack Sterling, his arms crossed on his breast, his eyes moodily fixed upon Avice, who stood in the bright moonlight, the bubbling spring at her feet, her superb white-clad figure thrilling with indescribable agitation, a sort of furious despair in her glorious eyes, her lips parted with a half-demoniac yet fascinating smile, her hands and arms eloquent in their free gesticulation.

"You confess that you are at last hopelessly enthralled by my beauty," she was saying, "and yet you complain when I confess that I have no heart, but only a hungering admiration for your ruddy comeliness—a mere frenzy for possession—to give you in return?"

"Well, who wouldn't complain of such a one-sided exchange?" grumbled the young man. "How can you blame a fellow for feeling sort of humiliated by such an assurance?"

"One-sided? Softly, Jack. If my uncle's wealth were not at my back, would my beauty still be potent to efface Bertha Forrest's superior tenderness—womanliness, if you will—from your thoughts?"

"I don't know," doggedly. "Perhaps not. Plague on it, Avvy, I couldn't be a beggar; you know that. Still I am not so sure of your question. By Jupiter! your dark beauty is simply incomparable. But, somehow, you seem to have no heart at all any longer, but only to be willing to take me as a sort of a prize-winner at a beauty show."

She laughed her low, musical laugh, which yet seemed to have something unearthly and terrible in it.

"Heart?" she exclaimed, her hand wandering curiously over her bosom. "Have I not confessed to you that mine is no more—dead? Jack, it was murdered, assassinated, and by you!"

"By me?" cried the young man, in a startled tone.

CHAPTER XVII.

REVELATION.

"YES, by you!" continued Avice, in whose face a terrible look, like the unlaidd ghost of an old agony was come. "Jack, you remember a love episode between you and Bertha Forrest in the conservatory on the morning of Decoration Day?"

He flushed, without answering.

"That will do!" with a repetition of the low, eerie laugh. "I witnessed it, and I overheard. Jack Sterling, at that instant love was slain in my heart! Thenceforth, I might desire you, my resolve to possess you might be even intensified, your place in my imagination was undimmed,

but, there was a strange physical and emotional shock in one—I pressed my hand curiously to my breast as I am doing now—the hurt was mortal, the stunning blow had been given, as by the lightning-stroke; for life or for love my heart was dead! Give me your hand!

She leaned forward, with her right hand extended imperatively, the left being still pressed firmly under her bosom—her exquisite face, unshadowed by any head-covering, gleaming statuesquely white and commanding in the moonlight.

He complied with a shrug of his shoulders and with an assumption of being more or less bored, which, however, it was easy to see was forced.

Taking Sterling's hand in hers, she pressed its palm firmly against her left side, studying his face curiously as she did so.

The young man started, drew nearer, looked at her curiously, and then suddenly pulled away his hand with a surprised and troubled look.

"By heaven! you haven't exaggerated," he admitted in a low voice. "There is a difference!"

She smiled.

"A difference?"

"Yes."

"In what?"

"In the way your heart *doesn't* beat, but—just seems to lie there and—sort of live, you know."

"You are right—a death in life!"

"But come now, Avvy," cried Jack, with an effort as if to shake something off his spirit, "if this isn't nonsense, there must be something uncanny about it, I think."

"You are right; it is not cheerful."

"Talk of something else, then. Come, let us sit there once again in the old seat."

"No; it is better out here in the pour of the full moon. I love to stand and bathe and wash in it, as the Gypsies do, and as perhaps their supposed ancestors, the ancient Egyptians, loved to do before them."

"Oh, I'm agreeable, my dear!" and he good-naturedly appropriated a little raised mossy bank at her side and close by the bubbling spring, while she remained standing. "And speaking of Gypsies, Avice, there's an encampment of the queer folk in part of our woods back on the Glenville road. Brandymere and I drove past it to-day. Very picturesque and felonious. Wouldn't you like to visit the rogues?"

"Perhaps so," abstractedly. "But I'm not thinking of Gypsies now, Jack."

"And yet you're more than half-like them yourself."

"Like a tropic branch of them, then. The south is in my veins, Jack, if the north is in my heart."

"Oh, no more of the heart business!" with masked uneasiness.

"Why not?"

"You haven't got any, you know," with a short laugh.

"Yes—a dead one."

"Heigh-ho! we didn't trouble over such ghastly metaphysics in the old times at this tryst."

"There was no need," somberly. "My heart was alive and quick enough then. Jack!" abruptly.

"Well, Avvy?" And he took one of her listlessly hanging hands, sparkling with rich rings, and passed his touch admiringly up and down the round, beautiful arm, whose bared perfectness would have complemented the armless Venus of Milo itself.

"I have forgiven the unforgettable—that episode with Bertha Forrest—the heart wound that was so mortal. You are willing, with equal magnanimity, to take me as I am—dead heart and all, you know?"

"Bosh! Aren't we engaged, and the matter settled for October?"

"But that isn't all. I must have all you can give—your life, your love, your exclusive worship, your very soul!"

"In return for but part of yourself?" half-banteringly. "Be content as I am, Avvy—to enjoy and to forget—to like each other first rate, while rolling in Uncle Hal's millions."

"To enjoy and to forget!" she snatched away her hand. "What would you have to forget, compared with me—another's love—and I, the death-wound that it cost me?"

"Oh, give over!" half-angrily.

"I cannot!" she turned upon him in sudden passion, her mobile face wreathed with fierce longings, her hands extended toward him with their finger-tips up-hooked like the talons of a bird. "Jack, you must pledge your all for the moiety I offer—everything—it is my due for the wrong you have done me! Otherwise there must be an end."

"You will take the risk of making it so, then. Let Uncle Hal know that it isn't my fault—my break-off, you know."

His cold-bloodedness seemed to both infuriate and torment her. For an instant she seemed disposed to spring upon and tear him. Then she burst into a bitter, mirthless laugh.

"Only the money, never the *me*!" she mocked. "A proud and enviable position for me, to be sure—so lover-like, so fond!"

"You're not fair, Avice," gazing at her moodily. "You must know that it is yourself—your beauty—that is overpowering me."

"A clever distinction—not myself, but my beauty!" with a hard laugh. "Well, then, say that it is that alone, and not the money. Say it, and swear to it, Jack!" entreatingly.

By an opportune and unconsciously passionate gesture, as she started back, the filmy Marie Antoinette kerchiefing of the neck and shoulders caught upon a ragged, down-nodding spray of the old oak, and was ripped almost completely away at one side, to a sufficient revelation, before she could snatch it back with a burning blush, of her snowy and perfect bust such as would have fluttered a college of cardinals at high mass, or have torn an anchorite from his shrine.

Jack Sterling's cold-bloodedness was of the spirit, not of the flesh.

He sprung to his feet and caught his cousin in his arms.

"Yes, by Jupiter!" he cried, kissing her furiously; "I both say it and swear to it, my darling. Heart or no heart, your beauty is of the angels! Avice, my treasure, my arch-witch—but—Oh, I see! Do you forgive me, dear?"

She had torn herself out of his embrace with a face of flame. Everything was in that burning blush—shame, anger, self-contempt, humiliation, revelation, intellectual mortification, bitter recognition of the pure sensuousness of what her physical charms had alone been able to effect.

Then she laughed, and, having readjusted her kerchief, sat down in the mystic moonlight at his side.

"I am content, Jack!" she said. "Do you not see how happy and proud I am?"

"Well," a little dubiously, "I hope so, Avice."

"Oh, no doubt about it. Look you, Jack, a word or two that escaped you awhile ago set me to thinking. Let us discuss our worldly future. What do you say?"

"With all my heart."

"Won't it be nice, with our twenty thousand a year to start on, and all of dear old Uncle Hal's millions prospectively in our laps?"

"Now you're warbling, my love! Well, I should rather say so!"

"But, Jack?" she was looking at him curiously.

"Well, my dear?"

"Supposing Uncle Hal should fall in love—think of taking to himself a second wife, you know?"

He stared at her blankly—half in terror.

"Good Lord!" was all he could say.

She nodded.

"It wouldn't exactly do, would it—I mean for us?"

"I should say not! But what could have put this preposterous notion in your head?"

"It isn't preposterous."

"You are jesting."

"Indeed, I am not! The young woman is forthcoming—already in his mind's eye, and perhaps still more in his fossilized imagination."

"Young woman?"

"Why not?"

"But he will never see sixty-seven again, or chronology is at fault."

"His heart is young, though, and his purse unimpeachable."

"Who is the young woman?"

"Bertha Forrest."

Jack made a jump clear off his feet, but she drew him down to her side again and briefly made known the revelation to Mrs. Marjoram and herself as furnished by the old gentleman's excessive jubilation over the parlor-maid's arrest and the consequent vindication of Bertha Forrest's good name.

"By Jupiter!" was his final and somewhat despondent comment; "I should have thought it would have been old Joram herself, if anybody. But it's appalling enough in any case!"

Avice seemed sufficiently grateful for the simple dejection, or amazement, of his tone, in which anything like passing regret for Bertha on his own part seemed to have little or no admixture.

"We must deal with the possible calamity as it threatens," she said, guardedly. "I suppose you will agree that a second marriage by Uncle Hal would be a calamity—for us?"

"Good Lord! what else?" with a sort of groan. "The governor is a still hale and hearty man—there might be children, and—but it is simply appalling to contemplate! One offspring alone would knock us completely out."

"Jack!" confidently.

"Yes, Avvy?" with eagerness.

"Uncle Hal and Miss Forrest must never meet again."

"God forbid! Well, Rod is looking her up for me; and she once told me she would like nothing so much as to live in Southern California."

"So; and he is looking her up for me; with doubtless a secret commission in Uncle Hal's behalf."

"Like enough."

"When she is found—By the way, isn't the Los Angeles and Santa Barbara air also recom-

mended for paralytics, such as Miss Forrest's aunt?"

"I believe so."

"It can doubtless be arranged, then."

"It must be!" cried Jack, with an injured air; "that or something equally distant, equally remote. Good God! think of what's at stake!"

"Tell me, were Bertha discovered, would you assist in persuading her to the wisdom of such a step?"

Jack moved a little uneasily on his seat, soft and mossy as it was. Though perhaps hardly aware of how much of a cur he was, he was not without a lingering manly sense apart from his ingrained mercenariness and fear of poverty.

"Well, perhaps I would indirectly, you know," he made shift to partly mumble in response. "You see, a good deal will depend on Joram's assistance and finesse in the matter; but, in view of my past relations with Bertha, it would not look very well for me to—"

Here the detective, in his place of concealment, found his companion to be resting against him as a dead weight. She had fainted after taking the iron thus far into her soul in silence.

"So!" he said to himself, while noiselessly carrying the poor girl back into the friendly obscurity of the wood, with now and then a commiserating glance at the pale sad face. "Uncle Hal and Miss Forrest must never meet again," eh? Well, we'll see about that."

CHAPTER XVIII.

DEUS EX MACHINA.

FAINTING, as a feminine weakness or privilege, was a thing that Bertha Forrest, a true soldier's daughter, was but little addicted to.

The motion and air of being half-carried, half-supported through the cool obscurity of the wood by the kind-hearted detective soon restored her to herself; and she was still pale, but perfectly composed when they had finally retraced their steps as far as the little moonlighted glade in the vicinity of the Simpson cottage from which they had set out an hour or so previously.

"Even more has been revealed than I looked for," then said Joram, speaking for the first time. "It will be best for you to quit this place at once, my friend."

"I think so, too," observed Bertha, slowly.

"But pray tell me why *you* think so."

"Those conspirators—and a precious pair of Mammonites, well enough mated, they are!—would have you quit it, in *their* way, by fair means or foul, in short order."

"Well," with a wan little smile. "Mr. Sterling was really right as to my predilection for Southern California."

"Was he indeed? But you'll quit this hole, and without deserting the Irvington-Tarrytown neighborhood, under my personal direction."

"Why?"

"So you will shall *not* be out of the way of meeting Mr. Hollister again, if chance wills it."

"But—"

"Remember that you have promised to submit to my guidance unquestioningly."

"Ah! Well, then, what must I do?"

"It is not yet ten o'clock. Go at once to the Simpsons and make ready to accompany me. I shall be there with a conveyance in half-an-hour. Let me see, you are unacquainted in Tarrytown, I presume?"

"Save with the address of Mr. Baylis's boarding-house, yes."

"It wouldn't exactly do for you to go there, though he is a good fellow, and shall not be debarred out of your new secret. Fortunately, I am not so unfamiliar with the localities hereabouts as you are. I have it! Be in readiness, then."

"Wait, Mr. Marjoram," as he made a movement to go. "You are doing a great deal for me."

"If you allude to it again, I shall be seriously displeased."

"But your own long absence from Cragaby may excite suspicion."

"You don't suppose I am going to return there in a hurry? Not, at least, till I have thoroughly provided for you against all contingencies! Both Jack and Miss Hollister will miss Joram's assistance and *finesse* in the matter," I am thinking. Bear up now, my friend; get yourself in readiness for this transfer—I will attend to to-morrow's fishing excursion in my own person; and trust me to take care of the Simpsons."

He waited to see her go off obediently toward the house, and then glided rapidly away in a different direction.

True to his word, he was at the house with a coach inside the stipulated half-hour.

"Look here, you two!" said the Expert, taking the colored couple to one side, after Miss Forrest and her trunk had been disposed of; "you may have heard something of me as a detective?"

Yes; they had heard of it, and both appeared to be no less thoroughly frightened than mystified.

"Hearken, then," he continued. "You are to make no mention of my agency in this matter, and, if questioned by Miss Avice, you are to

say that your guest disappeared mysteriously in the night."

"Yes, Marse Rod."

"Look to it, both of you, that you fail me not in this. You are both thieves, and I know and can prove it. Not only the drowned convict's ghost shall haunt you unremittingly, but you shall wear the prison stripes in your own persons, and in short order at that, if you dare to disobey me in the smallest particular."

They looked thoroughly impressed with these parting injunctions, and the detective forthwith entered the coach, whose driver at once put the whip to his steeds.

"I have succeeded admirably," said Joram to his companion, as they were being driven away. "You are to be with a good, honest woman, with whom I was a favorite when a boy. Her son is a fisherman, and their house is close to the river in Tarrytown. She knows enough of and is sufficiently sympathetic with your story to be careful of the seclusion that you desire. I shall see you in the morning, and you need be under no concern as to your future."

She did not answer, and by a glimpse which he presently obtained of her pale face he saw that it was wet with silent, fast-flowing tears.

Only Bertha's own heart could know what the revelation of Jack Sterling's unworthiness had cost her.

When he had introduced her to her destination, however, she was once more composed.

"You will not return to Craggsby, then?" she asked.

"Not until after our fishing excursion," he replied, smiling.

"But this is very incomprehensible, Mr. Marjoram. Really, I have never cared for fishing, and—"

"Neither have I—with ordinary fish as prospective victims. Good-night and God bless you! I will bring Baylis around with me in the morning."

He pressed her hand reassuringly, and was gone.

"How strange that a detective should be a good angel!" thought Bertha, amid her lonely and unhappy reflections, known only to her pillow and herself, a little later on. "I had always conceived them as being either cunning rascals, but little better than the rogues they professed to pursue, or as sphinx-like mysteries, with neither sentiment or kindness."

Once more on the following day did Avice Hollister pay an early morning visit to the negro couple, but with the distinct intention on this occasion of seeing and talking with Bertha Forrest herself.

Her astonishment, on being informed that the young woman had mysteriously disappeared, can be readily imagined.

"Gone!" she echoed, confronting the pair with angry and suspicious looks. "Why, how can that be?"

"Dunno, Miss Avice," replied Old Sam, wagging his head. "We hadn't done took any 'cautions, you know, nebber dreamin' but dat de young gal war jes' in lub wif de place. But at daybreak dis mawnin' de trufe jumped onto us dat melted clean out of sight."

"I t'ink dat Marse Baylis must hab somet'ing to do wif it, Miss Avice," struck in Old Kate. "Leastwise, de young gal c'u'd nebber hab yanked out dat trunk alone."

"This is all very unreasonable!" cried Miss Hollister. "Beware how you attempt to deceive me!"

"Deceibe Miss Avice?" Old Sam and Old Kate seemed horror-stricken at the very suggestion of such base ingratitude on their part. Perish the thought!

"Never mind," said Avice, at last, after vainly trying to get some better information. "Should I find that you have really dared to treat me in bad faith—But wait!" abruptly. "Might you have had a visit from Rod Marjoram, the detective, whom you remember of old as a boy?"

What! snaky and wriggly little Rod, who shot off a finger of his left hand while rabbit hunting with "Marse Jack" down in Indian Hollow so long ago? And was he "grewed up" now? Why, no; nothing could please them better than to see wriggly little Rod again, though such a treat for sore eyes was hardly to be their good fortune.

Despairing of making anything more out of them, Avice at length hurriedly retraced her steps, with the intention of making a clean breast of her treachery with regard to the young woman's primary disappearance, now that he had become her fellow-conspirator, so to speak, and as the only recourse left open to her in view of this new and unforeseen embarrassment.

Instead of first meeting Jack, however, she encountered Lord Brandymere, who, true to his athletic English habits, had been taking an early morning "constitutional" over the hills and far away.

"Miss Hollister, you are looking charming today!" cried his lordship, hastening to meet her with much animation in his face and manner. "Do let me walk with you a little."

The polished and good-natured animalism of this gentleman was by no means offensive to the young *intriguante*, and her thoughts had not

been unmixed with a long-headed though vague speculation as to his possible usefulness in the future.

"And what is to prevent it, my lord?" she asked, archly, as he passed on in the direction of the orchard by her side, looking very flushed and happy.

"Aw, well, you know, one never quite knows how to take engaged young ladies," he replied, with an occasional hot and hungry look askance. "And, aw, I wouldn't like to overstep any of your American *convenances*, you know."

"Nonsense! An engaged young lady can still keep a friend or two, and still be within the proprieties, I hope.—Thanks, I can get over without assistance. Well, then!"

They had come to a stile, that was between the woodland and the orchard at the intersection of this path, and he was already over it with an athletic leap, and holding up his hands for her as she mounted the insecure steps.

Then the upper step, which was weather-rotted, unfortunately gave way beneath her nervous step, and the next instant she was precipitated in his arms.

There would have been nothing objectionable in that if he had not suddenly lost all command of himself.

As it was, he fairly crushed her up in his embrace, besides raining a dozen furious kisses or more upon her startled face, before she could tear herself away, breathless and indignant.

"Sir! how dare you?" was all she could say, in the tumult that only served to heighten her beauty in a more ravishing degree.

Lord Brandymere's manner of accepting his just rebuke was peculiar, to say the least.

"Aw, of course I'm very sorry and all that, you know," he said, rather coolly, with a short laugh. "But look here, my dear Miss Hollister, a fellow can't be expected to be made of ice, you know. Allow me!" and taking her arm in his strong hand, he conducted her, more wondering than angry now, to a rustic seat, where he complacently seated himself at her side. "I must tell you something, even if it costs me your permanent displeasure. Look here, why can't you marry me instead of that good-looking but vacillating cousin of yours?"

This was said in such an earnest and argumentative way as to increase her wonder.

"Have you taken leave of your senses?" she exclaimed.

"Aw, I fawncy not, really. The case is about this way," rubbing up his eye-glasses, and then pulling reflectively at his long straw-colored mustache while ogling her with a species of frank voracity: "You are by long odds the most magnificent creature I ever saw, you know. And then, for my part, what objection do you find to me?"

Avice suddenly burst into a laugh, a really hearty and amused laugh; for her life she couldn't have helped it, thoroughly angry and indignant as she had been.

The Briton was delighted.

"Haw, haw, haw!" he laughed. "But, honor bright, my dear miss, I love you no end. If it's a matter of money, why I am perfectly willing to let your uncle's fortune slide. Am quite rich enough, as I stand, you see; and I rawther fawncy my character will stand inquiry as the world goes. Have never been a drunkard, and only gamble to win. Then there's my title, which is the genuine thing. However, we'll drop that. Perhaps I don't care any more for it than you do. By Jawve! I am hit for life, Miss Avice. Haven't been so far gone on anything since—well, since, my first horse in the Derby!" with a sudden burst of confidence. "Haven't 'pon honor! Now, really, you know, why can't you take me in place of the other fellow?"

The words from *Locksley Hall* came instinctively into Avice's mind—"something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse"—but the British simplicity of her titled wooer was none the less refreshing.

"I suppose," she replied, still smiling, "it's because I love 'the other fellow.'"

"Oh, really," meditatively, and with a curious look of inquiry in his admiring gaze, "but now are you quite sure of that?"

"Quite sure whether I love Jack or not? What a question!"

"Well, now, I don't know—pray don't be offended—but somehow it has never struck me that you—er—could love at all—that is, as other women love, you know."

"And why not?"

"I don't know."

"But," curiously herself, "why shouldn't I be as capable of loving as other women are?"

"I really can't say exactly. But somehow you've latterly struck me as being—er—as being—"

"As being what?" impatiently.

"Well—er—as being simply charming and fascinating, without any emotional or heart nonsense about you, you know."

"Indeed! And you would gladly have me marry you, knowing that?"

"Wouldn't I, though? And why not?"

"Believing that of me?"

"Bless me, yes!" with a devouring look. "As my wife, you know, *you would belong to me.*"

"Ah, indeed!" rising coldly. "Well, perhaps,

my lord, you had better select another entry for the Derby for the exclusive concentration of your extraordinary affections."

He shook his head despondingly.

"No go, after having seen you! I say, do stay a little longer."

"No; I am going."

"One minute more then!" seizing her hand with boyish impulsiveness. "I say, give me a promise—do!"

"What would you have me promise you, Lord Brandymere?"

"To give me a show—er—in case of your chancing to break off—er—with the other fellow, you know."

"There is no likelihood of such a thing."

"But supposing its possibility?"

"Yes, then."

A gloating glint came into Lord Brandymere's blue eyes, but his clownishness was gone, and it was only as the polished man of the world that he bowed his gratitude.

"By Heaven! what a stepper she is!" he muttered under his breath, while following her retreating figure with his glance.

CHAPTER XIX.

AN EMOTIONAL MORNING.

It proved to be a rather emotional morning for a young woman without a heart.

Avice had no sooner escaped from Lord Brandymere's rather unique style of love-making than she encountered her uncle on the front piazza at Craggsby, very much out of humor.

"Why are you all keeping breakfast waiting?" he exclaimed. "And then to think of Rod Marjoram having mysteriously disappeared! His room was unoccupied last night, so Barker assures me; and nothing has been seen of him since yesterday afternoon."

Avice's uneasy conscience was quick to take vague alarm at this, though she hardly knew why.

"Oh," she replied, dissembling, "he has doubtless tired of playing footman, uncle, and will most likely turn up in good time. But you shouldn't wait breakfast; and here comes Lord Brandymere to answer for himself. Where can Jack be?"

"Gadding, like the rest of you, I suppose," grumbled the old gentleman, leading the way, into the dining-room. "However," suddenly brightening up, and turning with a whisper to his niece, "maybe Rod is at last setting about looking up Bertha—I mean Miss Forrest—in good earnest, eh? Aha," rubbing his hands, "why didn't I think of that before?"

Jack was the last to make his appearance at the table, and, though he was looking preoccupied and ill-at-ease, he wouldn't vouchsafe to account for his dilatoriness save with a few unsatisfactory monosyllables.

Even Uncle Hal's queries as to his superintendence of the fishing arrangements for the afternoon only elicited a crusty response to the effect that Barker had his orders with regard to baits, tackle and refreshments; while a breezy yarn of Lord Brandymere about landing a Scotch salmon, weighing ninety pounds, that had previously swallowed a turbot of even superior avoirdupois, only evoked from him an insolent stare.

As for Avice herself, he seemed to avoid her glance somewhat studiously.

However, directly after breakfast he seized the first opportunity to signal her, and she lost no time in taking up a garden hat and following, as he led off over the lawn in the direction of the river, while Uncle Hal and Lord Brandymere went off to the stables with their cigars, pending the coachman's return from Tarrytown with the morning mail.

Jack presently brought up at a rustic bench under a little clump of evergreen at the foot of the lawn, and overlooking the railroad track, the river beyond and the Wanderer at her anchorage.

He looked up a little confusedly as his beautiful cousin joined him at this spot, which, like many another one, was not without its pleasant associations of their callow days.

"Can you guess what called me away so early this morning?" he asked, with some abruptness.

"I haven't the least idea," she replied, with no less, but better dissembled, anxiety than his own.

"That girl, Maggy McMann!"

"What?"

"It is true. Her messenger found me as I was taking the air at break of day, and I hitched up and drove back with him to White Plains jail."

"But what could she want?"

"Oh," with a shrug of the shoulders, "to repeat her version of the jewelry affair, as a matter of course."

"But why single out you?"

"I don't know.—Avice!" abruptly.

"Well, Jack?" And she had herself thoroughly in hand by this time.

"Save that a belief in the girl's story would put you in a bad light—a deuced black light, in fact—I would have been impressed with the truth of her innocence as she asserts it."

"Indeed!"

"I would, by Heaven! She is ignorant and vain, but it is hard to believe her a thief."

"Her cunning, rather! How else account for the ornaments found in her box?"

"She swears that you gave them to her, besides flattering her with hopes of some day taking Dorton's place as your maid. The girl's growing insolence of late, too—that and her unwonted airs and her indifference to her duties—would seem a natural corroboration of her claim—always apart, as I said before, of putting you in an unenviable light."

"Is it possible? And what object could I have had in ruining the miserable wench's character?"

"She confesses that she blackmailed you—that is, she swears she did, among other things, and that it was your only way out of her power."

"Her power?" contemptuously.

"Yes. She swears that she overheard you plotting with young Baylis for Bertha Forrest's abduction."

"Indeed!"

"That was your secret, she says. I—I," slowly, "have also questioned John, the coachman, who, according to the girl's story, was, next to the young Englishman himself, the chief instrument in the abduction."

"Still another servant, eh?" But it was now with a great effort that Avie masked her uneasiness with her scorn. "Well, well, you seem to be getting along with my arraignment bravely."

"Don't, Avie! I am simply telling you what this Irish girl swears to."

"Oh, no!" scornfully; "you are now doubtless to tell me what the coachman swears to?"

"He simply denies everything, as a matter of course. But then his manner while doing so was—well, he wasn't easy."

"Still, you have the kitchen and housemaids to fall back on, to say nothing of Barker and Dorton."

"Avie," heedless of her sarcasm, "answer me one question, solemnly on your word of honor, and the ugly thing shall, I assure you, be permanently put to rest in my mind."

She laughed.

"Solemnly and on my word of honor, then, what is it you would ask?"

"To the best of your belief, is the girl Maggy guilty of *stealing* the valuables that were found in her trunk?"

Avie hesitated. A deliberate, point-blank lie, and to the man she cared for more than any other in the world—the man who was to be her husband! All the womanliness in her nature revolted at it, to say nothing of the way it might complicate the confession she was resolved on as to the actual abduction itself. However, there is no backward step in the path of treachery and deceit, and her hesitation was so brief as not to be remarked.

"Of course I believe it!" she replied, coldly. "It seems to me there is no other reasonable explanation."

"The young man's face almost instantly cleared, and he held out both his hands to her."

"I believe it, too, then—let the jade suffer the penalty!" he cried, in an immensely relieved tone.

"But why should she have sent for you in particular, Jack? And, instead of taking his hands, she nestled in between them, with her arm about his neck, and her eyes upturned jealously to his."

"I don't know, and don't care," kissing her with a hearty, if off-hand, spontaneity that was more than a compensation for her self contempt. "Think no more of it, my darling."

"But, Jack, I—I have still a confession to make, in—in part confirmation of what that girl claimed."

"A confession?"

"Yes; but tell me first, you haven't forgotten our agreement of last night?"

"Oh, as to permanently preventing the governor from making a fool of himself with Bertha Forrest?"

"Yes."

"That stands, of course," with slightly renewed anxiety. "Just as soon as I can talk it over with Rod Marjoram—"

"Jack, there is no need. The girl Maggy was blackmailing me—in just so far her story is true, and no further."

"What! then—"

"I *did* plot with Baylis for Bertha's abduction, and have known of her whereabouts from the first."

He pushed her back from him a little, looking at her curiously.

"You did this?" he slowly asked.

"Yes," her cheeks on fire, but returning his gaze unshrinkingly.

"Why did you do this?"

"Can you ask? I was mad—I was fearful she would take you from me else!"

Sterling's mind was a whirl of strange thoughts. If his proud cousin had stooped to this much, why not to the rest?—of what dastardly phase in the contemptible and unsavory complication might she not have been equally capable? Still, those glorious eyes were upon him, the sensuous aura of her divine beauty was around him, and would it not all have been for

her love for him? Not altogether love, though, with her heart confessedly in ashes, and yet—the intoxication remained. He sunk upon the rustic seat, however, drawing her down to his side, though still keeping her a little aloof, and even this was something to her hungering and crime-stained soul.

"All for you, Jack, all for you!" she cried, throwing herself upon his breast in a storm of passionate weeping. "I swear it, Jack! Put me from you for it, and you will kill me, you will kill me!"

CHAPTER XX.

THE FACE IN THE MIST.

JACK STERLING was as greatly moved as his indolent and rather shallow nature was capable of being.

While more or less shocked at the unexpected revelation that had been made to him, he, nevertheless, petted and soothed the beautiful weeper in a manner that was grateful to her tormented and guilty soul.

"There, there! don't cry any more, Avvy," he said. "Though it was all very wrong of you, perhaps it was all for the best. Do stop sobbing in that heart-breaking way. It's so sad, you know, and—such a bore!"

She started back, her tears dried in an instant. Jack felt still more uncomfortable. Her wild grief had been very unexpected, and then there had always been something desperate and terrifying in the girl's manner of weeping even when a child.

"You see," he went on, nervously, "it's all right now that it's over and done. Besides, we've got to face the present difficulty."

"Of course, Jack." She was even half-smiling now. "And you really forgive me my treachery to that girl?"

"To be sure, to be sure," with growing cheerfulness. "You see, we *must* stick, you and I. Good Lord! isn't it the governor's millions that we've at stake? Yes, yes; but that must be as plain to you as to me."

She shot a glance at him that it was perhaps as well that he did not heed. Was she as nothing then, and the money everything? For the passing moment she could almost have hated him.

"How odd that the mist should be rising at this hour of the morning!" observed Jack, for want of something better to say. "However, it shows that the water is warmer than the air, which ought to be good for the fishing after lunch."

She made no immediate reply, but sat looking moodily out over the water and the strange, ghost-like action thereon of the mist, which was so slowly and softly curtaining everything away—the yacht at anchor, a passing sail or two, the trees, the rocks, the tree-tufted points of land—and yet affording such hide-and-seek glimpses back again of what it so fluctuatingly hid.

"I wonder if death is like that," thought Avie to herself. "Are we slowly drawn off into milky nothingness, only to sparkle back into occasional patches of sunny consciousness, like those rising and vanishing objects out yonder? Or is the cloud-curtain thicker, denser and more irrevocable out of which there is never more a return of consciousness, of emotion, of passions—of any or all of those attributes that so vex and yet so please us here?"

Though a regular church attendant, she was absolutely without religious faith, with an intellectual contempt for it in others, which, however, she had never failed to keep carefully concealed.

"I say, Avy!" Jack suddenly exclaimed.

"Well, Jack?" And she was once more out of the spiritualizing mist, and of the earth decidedly earthy.

"Where did young Baylis carry off Miss Forrest to?"

"To the Simpsons' tenant-house."

"What!"

"Yes, Jack. And now our chief difficulty begins. Miss Forrest mysteriously disappeared from there last night."

She forthwith explained to him in full.

"By Jupiter!" cried Jack, anxiously; "we must track her down before Uncle Hal does, or we are goners, Avie."

"True; if he hasn't already forestalled us," gloomily.

He looked up in a startled way.

"Good Lord! you think it possible?"

"Rod Marjoram was commissioned to find the girl on your account, wasn't he?"

"Yes."

"Well, he was also commissioned to find her on Uncle Hal's account."

Jack struck his forehead, and growled out something very like an oath.

"Could Rod have gone back on me in the matter?" he gasped.

"Come a little nearer, Jack. The fog is wheeling all about us now. Yes, then, in answer to your question, I think, on occasion, Rod could."

"But he is my old chum."

"Detectives mostly work for money, and Uncle Hal would be liberal. Besides, Rod never liked me, as you know."

"But what could that have to do with his action in the matter?"

"Everything, more or less. Besides," contemptuously, "isn't there a streak of chivalry, or sentimentality, in the ridiculous man's make-up?"

"Well," admitted Jack, "there used to be when he was a boy, that's a fact. By Jupiter, though!" in a deeply injured tone, "I can't imagine that Rod would go back on my interests."

"He could claim that he was doing nothing of the sort—but only finding the young woman for Uncle Hal first."

"What, and perhaps speeding her to a marriage that would make you and me beggars! Good God!" Jack started up, plunging his hands resolutely into his pockets; "it mustn't be, Avie. That is simply what it would mean to us. For Uncle Hal would never forgive your treachery to the girl, should it be made known; and here am I," half furiously, "your confederate in it all!"

"Your fuming won't help matters, Jack."

"True; I ought to be ashamed of myself. What a fog for this time in the morning, though it seems to be lifting a little. And listen to that steamer's bell, how close at hand it sounds!"

"That is nothing; it is always so in a fog. Let us keep to the main question, Jack. It is just this: How are we to circumvent this precious detective friend of yours, and get Bertha Forrest out of Uncle Hal's way?"

"What! you take it for granted that Rod is already at cross-purposes with us?"

"I do. The Three-Fingered Detective, indeed!" contemptuously. "How I hate that detestable man!"

"Well, he never was a favorite of yours, I know," with a laugh.

"If I disliked him as a youth, I detest him as a man—detest and fear him! Jack, he must be circumvented, or we are lost."

"I am with you there, if it really proves that he is working against us, which I can't quite believe as yet."

"I haven't a doubt that he is at the bottom of her flight from the Simpson cottage."

"You questioned the old couple?"

"Yes; they were dumb, or evasive, and suspiciously so."

"Rod always held them in a sort of terror, even as a boy," muttered Sterling, half to himself. "By Heaven! if I really thought, or was sure, he was playing me false in this pass—"

He was interrupted by a voice from somewhere out on the water, but sounding startlingly close at hand by reason of the fog.

"Ease her around!" called out the voice—Joram's voice, too, there could be no question of it. "There, now we're clear. Down with the helm!"

Avie had laid her hand on Jack's arm, and both were peering eagerly, anxiously out into the mist.

"What did I tell you?" she whispered. "Hush! there they are—there—there, just where the fog is being pierced by that down-darting spear of sunshine!"

It was true.

For an instant they had a clear, distinct view of a small sail-boat, rounding out over the water under the Wanderer's stern, and with its inmates plainly revealed.

There were three in the boat, and those were Bertha Forrest, young Baylis and Rod Joram, the detective!

Only for an instant, and then the fog closed down on them again.

Jack Sterling turned to his companion with a white, set face.

"What shall we do?" he asked.

"Nothing as yet," she replied, coolly. "That the detective is carrying her out of Uncle Hal's reach, no less than ours, is sufficiently certain. That much is in our favor."

"In what way?"

"Don't you see that money is what the treacherous hound is after—to place himself in a position to sell out the information of her retreat to the highest bidder?"

"And what then, since there could be no bidding against Uncle Hal?"

She gave him a peculiar look that almost made him fear her.

"True; but the detective's purpose may be crossed. He will put in an appearance at Cragsby presently, depend upon it."

"Well?"

"Jack," she again grasped his arm, the hard, deadly look deepening in her eyes, "we must see him first—the detective must not be permitted to communicate his secret to Uncle Hal!"

"But if he is as mercenary as you credit him with being—"

She interrupted him with a low, contemptuous laugh.

"Tush! leave it for me to plan. Come now, lunch must be nearly ready, and we will go on our fishing sail over to the bass grounds with our eyes and ears open."

He went back up over the lawn with her through the now rapidly dispersing mists, vaguely ill-at-ease, though his discomfort might have increased immeasurably, if indeed he might

not have shrunk appalled from that fair companion's side, had he so much as suspected the phantom of murder that was surely and recklessly assuming shape and confidence amid the emptiness of the heart whose dreary vault was that its emotions were in ashes.

Once, however, he caught her looking at him furtively, speculatively, and the look startled him unaccountably.

A significant quatrain came to him—was it dimly produced out of his remembrance, or did it spring to life out of his own rhyming faculty?—For, strange as it may seem in one of his disposition, Jack had perpetrated original verses in his day. The quatrain was this:

"And there suddenly peered from her lovely eyes,
Malice, Revenge and skulking Sin—
A strangely beautiful Paradise
For such a trio to nestle in!"

Arrived at the top of the lawn, Avice paused, and looked back over the river, where the mist was still lingering in fast vanishing shreds and patches.

"Fetch one of the field-glasses, Jack," she suggested. "I can hear the balls kissing in the billiard-room, so that Uncle Hal and Lord Brandymere must still be occupied there. We shall hardly be interrupted while sweeping the river for a minute or two, and I am curious to know the detective's course in that sail-boat."

Jack brought the glass, and one after another they industriously swept the now smiling surface of the waters with its assistance, but to no result.

The faces that had looked out of the mist only to vanish were faded into the unknown.

"Well, let him hide her away," murmured Avice, after a last disappointing survey. "When he reappears himself, intent on his bargaining, perhaps we shall be ready for him."

She handed back the glass, and then smilingly advanced to meet her uncle and his guest, as they were coming out upon the terrace, with promising words for the afternoon's fishing.

But Avice Hollister might have had less confidence in her bold and somber inner self, could she have guessed the real intentions of the wily detective with regard to the young woman whom she had so ruthlessly wronged.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE FISHING EXCURSION.

THE fish bit splendidly that day. Mr. Hollister, who was an old disciple of Walton's, was more than delighted, while the sporting proclivities of Lord Brandymere were satisfied to the full.

Even Avice, who had never cared much for the sport, was delectated by the way in which she kept swishing up the black bass, with an occasional tom-cod or striped bass, over the Wanderer's gunwale; and the fearlessness with which she did her own unhooking and rebaiting, without troubling either Cousin Jack or his lordship to do it for her was fresh cause for the latter's admiration especially.

"By Jawve, you know," said he on one occasion, "but you're an unexpected trump among ladies in this capacity, Miss Hollister! You can help yourself like a good one, and even seem to relish it, you know."

"Avvy always had that faculty pretty strong," struck in Uncle Hal, while chucklingly baiting his hook afresh after hauling in a fine specimen of the finny tribe. "Timorousness was never one of her faults."

Avice laughed, the loveliest color in the world coming into her cheeks as she looked up from under the stiff brim of her broad-ribbed sailor's hat.

"If they would always bite and submit to capture as merrily as to-day," she replied, "I would never complain of angling as a pastime. And as for helping myself, it's a thing I'm in the habit of doing. But dear me! what sort of monster can I have hooked this time?"

The stout grass-line was cutting this way and that through the water, while straining and tugging upon her gloved grasp at a great rate.

"Hang on!" cried Brandymere; "it's like enough a corker!"

"More likely a dog-fish!" exclaimed Jack.

And, deserting their own lines, they sprung so simultaneously to her assistance as to come in collision amidships with such force that each went tumbling over on his back, as the vessel chanced to make a sudden lurch at the same instant.

They both regained their feet laughing, however, whether with much sincerity or not, and by that time Uncle Hal had sprung to his niece's assistance and helped her to land her fish, which proved to be the prize catch of the day—a superb striped bass of great weight and gameness.

Dorton, who had accompanied the party, together with Mrs. Marjoram, was ever prouder of the achievement than was Avice herself, who indeed was disposed to treat the affair with unaffected indifference.

"My young lady thought to be a real lord's lady, ma'm," she whispered to the housekeeper, while observing the unmistakable rivalry of Brandymere and Jack Sterling as manifested over her young mistress's magnificent catch. "In addition to 'er beauty and accomplishments, Miss Avice 'as the true sporting instincts

w'at is dear to the 'aughty and 'igh-born Hinglish 'eart. Don't you think so, ma'm?"

"No, I don't, Jane Dorton, if you want an honest opinion," replied Mrs. Marjoram, with her accustomed bluntness. "She's just too good for any Englishman on earth, and I'm well content to see her stick to her Cousin Jack, who is as handsome again as that Englisher milord yonder. And so is Mr. Hollister himself, for that matter, notwithstanding his years."

"Ow can you say so, ma'm?"

"Because I think so, Dorton."

"And some, yes, I grant you, ma'm—that is in the case of Mr. Sterling, Mr. Hollister being entirely too hold to be considered; but in natural 'igh-born style and 'aughtiness you wouldn't venture to compare 'im to Lord Brandymere, ma'm?"

"Yes, I would, just that! And look here, Dorton, Mr. Hollister isn't an old man at all—not any more than I'm an old woman, which I don't suppose you'd pretend to assert?"

"Ho, no, ma'm!" with a covert snicker; "the Lord forbid as 'ow you should never count hover fifty birthdays, when you don't look thirty of 'em, ma'm. But then, as I was a-sayin'—"

Here there was an interruption by Barker, who came to demand the assistance of both women for the preparation of the collation in the cabin, which was to be a fine affair, with the captain, mate and engineer of the Wanderer as guests of the piscatorial party.

"If I adn't been deserted by my hassistant, Squiggs," observed Barker, who was also a Cockney, "I wouldn't 'ave 'ad to call on you ladies, but as it is there ain't no 'elp for it now, especially as Mr. Hollister wouldn't 'ear to my fetching hextra 'elp from the 'ouse. That John Squiggs is a great one, 'ee is!"

This sarcastically, and while they were busy-ing themselves about the table in the saloon.

"John Squiggs may not be shirking his legitimate duties so much as you imagine, Mr. Barker," somewhat mysteriously rejoined the housekeeper, who could not abstain from rushing to the defense of her "nevy, the detective" under any and all circumstances. "Perhaps, indeed, John Squiggs is other than he seems."

Both Barker and Dorton had already been no little mystified by the under footman's seeming officiousness in the exposure and arrest of the McMann girl, so that they were still more deeply impressed by Mrs. Marjoram's words and manner, and she refused to make herself better understood.

After the collation had been disposed of, with much agreeable conviviality on the part of the pleasure seekers and their nautical guests, the fishing was renewed, or rather the attempt was made to renew it, with additional enthusiasm. But it only ended in the attempt, inasmuch, as the fishing-ground had suddenly, and for some mysterious reason ceased to be prolific.

"This will never do!" grumbled Mr. Hollister, at last. "There's mighty little fun in fishing when the fish are absent or refuse to bite."

"Aw, we might try some other spot, you know," rather disgustedly suggested Lord Brandymere, while leisurely surveying a six-ounce chub as the result of twenty minutes' exemplary angling.

"I should say so," observed Avice, with a yawn that ended in a laugh, while Jack glowered upon the barren waters with knitted brows.

"Shall we try the lower side of the Head, sir?" inquired Mr. Withers, the skipper, touching his hat to Mr. Hollister. "There's also deep water and probably some fishing on that side the point."

This proposition being assented to, anchor was hoisted, the yacht's machinery put in motion, and she began to move around the bold and rugged promontory known as the Head, in whose upper or northern shelter the pastime had thus far been pursued.

But even before this the unusual fog of the forenoon once more began to gather over the bosom of the waters and the face of the adjoining picturesque highlands.

"It is remarkable," observed Mr. Hollister at last, after various comments had been made. "How do you account for it, Mr. Withers?" turning to the yacht-master.

"By the suddenness of the atmospheric cool wave that is already upon us, sir," was the skipper's reply, with assumed indifference. "It is perceptible enough." And he held up his hand into the rush of comparatively chilling air that was coming in brisk successive puffs up-stream. "No sign of a gale or other unpleasantness, eh?"

"None but what we can easily weather, sir." And they all strolled a little curiously after him as he stepped forward to give an order or two.

Just at this juncture they rounded out entirely from under the headland, and experienced the full, bracing sweep of the wind as it came careering up the river, ripping, swaying and tearing the ragged cohorts of the mist right and left.

The yacht was now under full way, and heading directly in under the southern lee of the headland, where the water was comparatively quiet, and the foggy curtain thicker than else

where, though just beginning to be shaken apart by the oncoming gusts.

"A boat ahead there!" suddenly shouted Withers, drawing back from peering forward into the mist to wave his hand at Mr. Byram, his mate, who was at the wheel. "Down with your helm, Jake, or we're aboard of her!" And at the same time he gave the signal to slow up.

"Down it is, sir!" was the cheery response from the wheel, while every one was now agog with peering forward for what as yet remained invisible, the fog having closed up afresh.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECRET OF THE MIST.

"ARE you quite sure there was a boat ahead?" demanded Mr. Hollister, turning to the yacht-master with a quizzical smile.

"Sure of it? Of course, I am, sir. Hark now!" And Withers held up his hand.

Yes; there, sure enough, was the sound of oars in rowlocks, or of a block and tackle at work, from somewhere close at hand in the fog.

And almost at the same instant two or three words were called out from the same direction in an anxious voice, the sound of which caused both Avice Hollister and Jack Sterling a sudden sense of alarm.

"Hallo!" cried the old merchant, brightening up surprisedly; "that was the voice of my scape-grace of a secretary, Tom Baylis, or I am vastly mistaken."

"Hardly possible, uncle!" said Jack, with forced incredulity.

"I should say not!" seconded Avice, touching Withers's arm as he was about to signal a second time for a slowing-up of the engine, the yacht being still under all but full way. "The idea!" And, in spite of herself, her anxiety was so undisguised as to cause Lord Brandymere to adjust his monocle afresh and look at both her and her cousin curiously.

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Mr. Hollister; "as if I wouldn't recognize Tom's voice! And where Tom is, there, of course, we may look for some news of— However, no matter!" And forthwith, leaning forward over the prow, with his hand at his mouth, he began bawling out Baylis's name.

"Ay, ay, sir!" responded from somewhere another yet equally familiar voice; "look out that you don't run us down!"

"My nevy, the detective!" delightedly screamed Mrs. Marjoram, who had also come forward, followed by Dorton and Barker.

Avice's other hand now pressed Jack's arm, which was next nearest her, and he looked up, their eyes meeting; an incident likewise curiously noted by the observant Englishman.

"Are you slowing up?" cried Mr. Hollister, turning to the yacht-master excitedly. "Those are doubtless friends of mine ahead there, wherever they may be."

"Yes, sir," was the reply; and then, as the mist suddenly parted, Withers yelled out:

"Up with the helm, Jake!"

But, it was too late.

The parting of the mist had suddenly revealed the sail-boat, with Baylis, the Detective Expert and Miss Forrest in it, the half-hoisted sail still flapping bewilderedly; and before the yacht's course could be swerved sufficiently the keen, on-rushing prow crashed into the smaller craft, apparently carrying it under or knocking it to pieces as the mist again shut down above and around.

There was a shout, a cry, a feminine wail, and all seemed over.

Instantly all was alarmed confusion and excitement on board the Wanderer; then a great puff of wind tore the fog into filmy tatters, and a single body that was perceived floating on the water was got on board in short order.

It was young Baylis, wholly insensible, and with a great, deep gash on the brow, from which the blood was flowing.

Both Avice and the housekeeper were apparently equally earnest in their sympathy, but if the former felt a deeper internal regret over the unfortunate young man, in the ruin of whose prospects she had been so directly though secretly concerned, she did not let it appear; while Jack, on his part, though very pale, could hardly mask his sense of relief over the probability of both Bertha Forrest and Rod Marjoram having found a watery grave!

It was only with considerable difficulty that young Baylis was resuscitated, and then it was only with his mind wandering; after which, on Avice's insistence, he was placed in her own and Mrs. Marjoram's exclusive care in the saloon.

"The poor chap!" exclaimed Lord Brandymere, who had been especially active in his personal aid from the moment of learning that the sufferer was an Englishman. "It's too demnition bad, you know, and God forbid that the two others have been drowned, though there's never any telling what may happen in one of these beastly fogs. I ought to know something about fogs, you know."

And then, together with Jack, he joined Mr. Hollister, who was making no attempt to disguise his distress while superintending the search for any other chance survivor of the disaster.

"If they are lost, I shall never forgive my-

self!" cried the old gentleman at last, when the fog had nearly altogether drifted off without affording any fresh discovery. The young lady was—as a singularly sweet character, while Rod Marjoram was always a pleasing rogue. Jack, you rascal!" turning upon the young man in a fit of impotent rage; "why don't you do or say something, instead of moving around with your hands in your pockets?"

"Really, uncle, you are unreasonable!" replied Jack, looking up in surprise. "I'd like to know what more can be said or done, with both the yacht's boats out, and every one on board here equally on the lookout."

"Oh, yes, of course!" and Mr. Hollister looked so unnerved and haggard as he plumped himself down on a seat commanding the useless search that was going on, that it would not have been much more surprising if he had beat his breast and wrung his hands. "Oh, this is sad! this is terrible! That lovely young creature, so dutiful, so modest!"

Mr. Withers presently consoled him somewhat, after the boats had been recalled, by saying that there was a chance of the man and woman having made their way to the shore before the fog had disappeared, inasmuch as no debris of wreck had been found, which seemed to prove that the sail-boat could neither have been sunk nor totally destroyed, as had at first been supposed.

"Make back for Craggsby, then," sighed the old gentleman, rising. "No one can think of any more fishing for to-day." And with that, he went into the cabin for news of young Baylis.

"Aw, the young woman in the boat, you know?" curiously queried Brandymere, turning to Jack. "She, aw, was then known to your family circle, I presume?"

"She had been employed by Miss Hollister as a seamstress," replied Jack, briefly. "A Miss Forrest, whom you may have remarked occasionally."

"Aw, let me see. A pretty and demure little brown-haired girl, with dark eyes, I believe?"

"Yes."

"I vaguely remember. And the governor, or I should say Mr. Hollister? He seems to be, aw, more or less overcome, you know."

"It looks that way," rejoined Sterling, yet more curtly, and he abruptly hurried away.

Lord Brandymere shrugged his shoulders and looked after him with the same curiosity which seemed to have already taken possession of him more than once.

He had quietly informed himself on the Miss Forrest abduction complication more thoroughly than was generally supposed; and was diplomatically considering if he might not extract from the intrigue some secret that would place Avise Hollister, whose beauty fascinated his imagination more than that of any woman he had ever met, at his mercy.

"There's big game afoot, you know," thought his lordship, phlegmatically lighting a fresh cigar. "And if it leads up to my capturing that superlatively stunning creature away from moody Cousin Jack with a wedding ring, I sha'n't mind a stain or two on her pretty finger-tips. By Jupiter! the after taming of such a lovely tigress were worth a year's rent roll."

As for Mr. Hollister, on entering the cabin saloon, he found the wounded young man extended, with closed eyes and inaudibly moving lips, on an improvised couch, with Avise as his sole attendant.

"Mrs. Marjoram was so distracted over her nephew's death," she said, in response to the old gentleman's inquiring glance, "that I sent her away, while Dorton was almost equally unstrung."

"This is really good and heroic of you, my dear," said Mr. Hollister, in a low voice, and gravely nodding his approval. "Though Mrs. Marjoram would do well not to mourn a death till sure of it. There is a strong probability of both Rod and Miss Forrest having reached the shore under cover of the fog. Withers is very hopeful of it. How is he now?" And he made a sign toward the prostrate form.

Avise was secretly furious at the glow which had come into her uncle's still haggard face at his mention of Miss Forrest's name, though she was careful to preserve the Samaritan role of nurse which had just earned his eulogy.

"The young man is very weak, uncle," she replied. "He has been talking a little, though, and I think his mind still wanders."

She said this in no little trepidation, for, so far from his mind wandering, the sufferer in the few words that he had succeeded in addressing to her had been somewhat the reverse of complimentary.

And at this moment his eyes opened, with a look of impotent anger and contempt that went far to increase her alarm, while he at the same time made an appealing movement as if he would like to take Mr. Hollister's hand.

The old gentleman complied with the mute request right heartily, after which he mixed a glass of brandy and water for the sufferer, which seemed to inspirit him not a little.

"You are so good, you have never been anything but kind and good to me, sir," said the young man, feebly, and not without an effort,

but quite rationally. "I can well thank you, now that I am dying."

"Stuff and nonsense!" cried Mr. Hollister, cheerfully. "You're doing nothing of the sort! But how is this? You don't seem wandering at all."

"I haven't been so, to my knowledge, sir," replied Baylis, with a look askance at Avise, as much as to say, "Don't be alarmed, I sha'n't give you away quite so badly as you seem to fear." "Perhaps Miss Hollister only thought so in her excitement. But it is true that I am dying, sir. It isn't only the wetting and this gash on my forehead," with a weak sign toward his bandaged head. "I feel that I have got some internal hurt."

CHAPTER XXIII.

YOUNG BAYLIS MAKES A HALF REVELATION.

"BUT this may be purely imaginary, my poor fellow," said Mr. Hollister, soothingly. "We're heading back for Craggsby now, and in less than half an hour you shall have the very best medical attendance."

Young Baylis shook his head.

"It will avail me nothing, sir," he said, sadly. "Tell me you forgive me."

"For running away so scandalously, eh? Well, then, yes, of course, I do, with all my heart!"

"It wasn't only that, sir. I deceived you from the first. I wasn't honest—or at least I had once been dishonest—when I came into your employ." And then, in his own ingenuous way, young Baylis made his confession as to the felony that had made him a fugitive from his native English town.

Though a rigid disciplinarian from his erstwhile strict business habits, there was nothing that went further to the extenuation of a fault in the sterling old merchant's estimation than a straightforward unbosoming of the same. Moreover, apart from his familiarity with the young man's constitutional weaknesses, the pitableness of the youth's present situation strongly appealed to his sympathies.

"A sad story, Tom, sad enough!" he exclaimed, when all was told. "And that was the only time you ever tripped, eh?"

"On my word, sir—on the word of a dying man!" cried Baylis, with all the energy that remained to him.

"Well, well, of course all is forgiven, my poor boy. But, why did you not depend enough on my good-nature to tell me this long ago?"

"Oh, sir, I knew your kindness, your benevolence, and yet—and yet I was afraid!"

"Aha! Moral spunk was ever one of your lackings, my boy, as I have frequently told you. However, a bygone is a bygone, especially when it is sincerely repented. But, bless me, man! was this the occasion of your mysterious disappearance?"

"Yes, sir," Baylis cast a covert look at Miss Hollister, whose immovableness of feature, notwithstanding what her secret fears might be, seemed to cause him some resentment, though he did not relax his generosity in continuing: "It was this way: Some one found out my secret, and threatened to expose it to you unless I took myself off."

"So!" and Mr. Hollister knitted his brows; "a species of blackmail command, eh?"

"Yes, sir; which I hadn't the moral courage to defy."

"Who was the scoundrel?"

"I prefer not to say, sir; leaving it to her—to the person's conscience."

"Her, eh? A woman, and to take such a brutal advantage of your timidity?"

"I shall keep that a secret, sir, with your forbearance."

"Let it go, let it go! But look here, was it also a condition imposed upon you that you should carry off Miss Forrest with you in your flight?"

"It was, sir; but I am pledged to the lady to give no particulars as to her disappearance in conjunction with mine."

"Keep your pledge, by all means, my man. But," eagerly, "there was no truth in the elopement theory—in her having planned to go away with you?"

"Not the slightest, sir, on my honor! I love Bertha Forrest, and, though it has been my abiding despair that I have loved her hopelessly, I am none the less willing to die in her service."

"Where is she now—that is, supposing she survived the boat-wreck—at least you can tell me that."

"No, sir, indeed, I cannot. The detective has sworn me to secrecy on that point. He is anxious to impart that information to you with his own lips. Oh!" And here the sufferer was interrupted by a violent fit of coughing and blood-spitting.

"But," continued Mr. Hollister, anxiously, after the necessary pause, "in case she alone should have survived, and Rod Joram should have been drowned?"

"What, he, the three-fingered wonder, the Detective Expert?" gasped Baylis. "No, no; I cannot think him the man to—to succumb to—to anything. Sir, sir," amid the throes of a yet more violent coughing fit, "give me your hand,

and say again that you forgive me. I—I board with—with a Mrs. Miller, Orchard street, Tarrytown. Have—have my body taken there. Letters—letters in my valise, by—by which you can communicate with my relatives in England. Oh!" And he was cut short by another convulsion that seemed as if it would rend his frame asunder, after which he fell back breathing faintly.

"Here, Avise," cried Mr. Hollister, energetically; "mix me some more of that brandy and water for him. That will do. Call Dorton, or somebody, and see how near we are to the dock."

Avise sprung to the door, after such mental suspense and distress as can better be imagined than described, while the kind old gentleman once more resumed his ministrations to the injured youth.

But, when Withers and several others entered the saloon five minutes later, accompanied by a Tarrytown physician, young Baylis had ceased to breathe.

"Poor fellow!" said the physician, after passing his hand down over the side of the remains; "it is a wonder that he survived such injuries for a dozen minutes. Three and perhaps four ribs completely crushed!"

"Mr. Hollister," said Lord Brandymere, drawing the old merchant to one side a little later on, when preparations were being made for the transfer of the remains to the boarding-house, "as I understand that the young man was a fellow-countryman of mine, and perhaps without kith or kin on this side the water, I wish you would let me see to sending his body back to his relatives at my expense."

Mr. Hollister was somewhat unprepared for the simple manliness and kind feeling with which this request was made, coming as it did from one whom he had theretofore regarded as an agreeable but somewhat heartless pleasure-seeker and man of the world.

"Lord Brandymere," he replied, "your request does you honor, but I must needs refuse it. Besides being in my employment, the unfortunate young man possessed much of my personal esteem, and it would not be meet that the last offices which you would so unselfishly perform should be undertaken by other than myself."

He then shook Lord Brandymere by the hand with unusual warmth, and, after signaling to Jack Sterling to accompany him, followed the men on shore who had charge of the remains.

"Come with me, Jack," whispered the good old gentleman, confidentially. "We surely ought to learn of Bertha's whereabouts from Mrs. Miller, or some one else, at the house where the poor young fellow boarded. He was scarcely the man to keep the secret with any one."

But, young Baylis proved to have been just that sort of man, and none other. By his gentleness and unobtrusive habits, he had earned the esteem of the good woman with whom he had boarded, but had remained a mystery both to her and a few others there with whom he had occasionally associated, by whom he had at last come to be regarded as possibly a melancholy young student of some sort, with perhaps a heart trouble of sufficient bitterness to turn him into a recluse.

That was all. Much disappointed, Mr. Hollister lost no time in looking after some money and letters that were found in the scant luggage of the deceased, besides notifying the coroner and an undertaker to take the remains in charge, after which he hurried to Craggsby with Jack, it being by this time nearly nightfall.

"Never mind," said he, determinedly, on the way thither, "if Rod Marjoram doesn't show up to-night, I shall put a dozen detectives on his track, if need be, but that I will sift this mystery of that young woman's whereabouts in short order."

"One would suppose, Uncle Hal," observed Jack, with an uneasy assumption of jocularity, "that young woman to be the nearest and dearest friend you have in the world, from the interest you take in her."

Mr. Hollister looked at his nephew a little slyly, and also a little shyly.

"Jack," he said, softly, "supposing the young lady to be still in the land of the living—and God forbid the contrary!—she might become just that and all that to me, though it would depend altogether upon herself. Who knows?" But further confidence than this he would not venture upon.

On reaching Craggsby, Jack seized the first opportunity to communicate what had passed to Avise.

"We're in the thick of it, Jack," was her comment, after a reflective pause. "Confer with me alone as soon after dusk as you can. The evergreens down at the foot of the lawn will be as good a place as another."

Jack assented, but said:

"Suppose, however, that Rod should come here seeking the governor in the interim, what then?"

"Do not imagine such a thing," she replied, "for in that case we are lost irrevocably, with nothing but a pittance for our future."

"And that," doggedly exclaimed the young

man, with a muttered oath, "shall never be, if I can help it."

She observed his sullen and desperate air with secret satisfaction.

"Hope for the best, Jack," she counseled, "and meet me as I have proposed."

They then separated.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A TRYST, AND WHAT CAME OF IT.

DINNER was rather a dull affair, by reason of the unexpectedly sad ending of the fishing excursion, and Jack Sterling found little difficulty in making the opportunity for his secret conference with Avice, as had been proposed by her.

"Uncle Hal," said he, at the close of the repast, "you and Lord Brandymere must contrive to amuse yourselves without me this evening. I shall knock about the village or elsewhere, and try to get some news of Rod for you."

"Good for you, Jack!" with a grateful look. "You might even question Long Peters, the night ferryman, with whom both Rod and you were so familiar of old."

"I'll do the best I can, uncle," and then Jack took himself off, after exchanging a glance with Avice, who at the same time made an excuse for retiring.

"What shall it be, Brandymere?" asked Mr. Hollister, taking his guest into the billiard room. "To tell the truth, the death of that unfortunate young man weighs heavily on my spirits, though that is no reason why you should be bored to death."

Brandymere had noticed the significant look exchanged by Avice and Jack, and was secretly resolved to take some sort of a hand in the intrigue which he was satisfied was in progress.

"Don't talk of my being bored in your charming house, my dear sir," he replied, as they lighted their cigars. "The thing is simply un-supposable. And, since you ask what it shall be, how would a rubber of cribbage go, after the open-air fatigues of the day?"

"Nothing could suit me better," replied Mr. Hollister, forgetful of his proneness to drop to sleep over the game, as a *post-prandial* pastime, which was just the reason for his lordship's proposing it. "Besides, by the day after tomorrow we should have our full complement of summer guests here, so that you will no longer have to depend upon such tame affairs with an old man like me for your amusement."

"Now look here, no more of that, you know, my friend," laughingly protested the other, as they sat down to their game. "I am just enjoying myself quietly and after my own heart, and if you can put up with my hare-brained society, in lieu of the young and pretty wife that you ought to have solaced yourself with long and long before this—and it's a puzzle to me that you haven't—why it's a compliment to myself, and nothing else, I assure you."

"Eh, eh?" and the old gentleman looked up keenly over the board at his good-looking guest. "What nonsense are you talking about, my lord?"

"None whatever, my dear sir," seriously, and lingering over the shuffling of the cards. "I am simply surprised that you have not remarried. You have wealth, affectionateness, good looks, good habits—all the requirements, in fact."

"Eh, eh? But a young wife, you said."

"And why not, in the name of conscience? You are still on the right side of sixty, I should judge, and sound as a racer, eye, wind, limb and hoof!"

"Well, you're not out of the way there, my friend," cried Mr. Hollister, not a little pleased.

"What have you to complain of then? In England you'd be thought to be in the prime of life—at all events, for remarrying, you know. There are thousands of charming young ladies who would be glad to jump at the chance, if afforded them, and with the best of the bargain on their side, at that, money or no money. Shall we cut for the deal?"

"Yes, yes, by all means, with all my heart! And just touch the bell at your elbow, my lord, for Barker and some wine."

And then the old gentleman entered into the game with a vivacity which his wily companion feared might outlast the accustomed soporific effects upon which he was counting.

Avice, on her part, had gone up to the exquisite little suite of rooms to which she had been accustomed at Craggsby since her arrival to the dignity of young ladyhood, and in the boudoir, or dressing-room, of which Dorton was engaged in putting things to rights, while full of the tragic event of the day.

"Yes, yes," said Miss Hollister, cutting the good creature short in her observations thereon. "It was all very sad, and I myself am more or less unnerved by it. You can go to your dinner now, my dear, and I shall scarcely want you any more this evening, unless I should chance to ring for you. By the way, what have you been unearthing out of that smaller closet yonder?"

"Bottles, and powders and all sorts of trash, miss," was the reply. "You may remember as how you told me to clean it out, miss. An' a horful scandal it is, miss. I do believe the gar-

dener's wife—who is something of a 'erb woman in 'er way, or so I 'ave 'eard—as been venturing to make huse of it during the winter months for storin' away of 'er 'orrid stuffs. It looks and smells like a chemist's shop, and I should think you'd want me to finish hup with it right away, miss, lest the smell might be makin' of you hill, you know."

"Never mind to-night, Dorton," said Avice into whose mind a swift thought had come while surveying the *debris* in question with assumed indifference. "I do not find the smell unpleasant, and may speak to Mrs. Morlock on the subject to-morrow. Draw down the curtains and light up before you go."

This being done and Dorton having gone, Avice rose from the *fauteuil* into which she had languidly dropped, and curiously examined the vials and small packages which had been taken from the closet and piled upon a convenient bracket.

Mrs. Morlock, the wife of the gardener and care-taker of Craggsby, had long been popular as a midwife and medicine-woman among the rustics of the adjoining country-side.

Among the packets was one on which was legibly written these words, "Hydrocyanic Acid—Be extra careful, as an infinitesimal quantity administered internally is fatal."

Avice knew that this must mean prussic acid, of whose terribly deadly effects as a poison she had heard, and her curiosity was intensified.

After examining the contents of the packet, which proved to be a grayish-bued, granulated substance, she slowly and carefully did it up again.

"Who knows?" she muttered, after a long and thoughtful pause, during which her face took on a hard expression that was in odd contradiction to its external loveliness.

Then, with a quick, resolute gesture, she thrust the packet in her bosom, and set about changing her garments, even to her shoes, for such as were stout, warm and serviceable, in preparation for her appointment with Jack at the foot of the lawn; for a preliminary examination had shown that the night had fallen misty and damp, though yet not dark, by reason of the moon affording, though herself scarcely visible, that hazy, opalescent light, or phantom-like sheeniness, which is so often characteristic of similar atmospheric conditions in midsummer.

She completed her costume by thrusting firmly through the heavy coil of glossy black hair at the back of her head a slender jewel-bilted dagger, which might be no less serviceable than ornamental in case of need, crowned the edifice with a soft little felt hat, and then, enveloping herself over all in a voluminous gray gossamer waterproof, gave a parting look in the mirror at which might be called her graceful shapelessness as thus presented.

"I should have been a medieval Spaniard or Italian," she thought, with a peculiarly satisfied smile while surveying her image in the glass. "At all events, I doubt if there was ever a Borgia, Cenci or Riccasoli woman ever slipped out of a secret palace door at night with a heart better attuned for adventure than my own just now. Heart? Ah, no!" with a mocking smile of confidence as she tapped her bosom with her gloved hand. "Let me not forget that that organ is no longer a part of the living and dauntless me."

She lowered the gas, stole out of the room, down by the servants' stair, and then out upon the terrace overlooking the lawn by a small little-frequented side-door and porch, unaware that her cloaked figure, as it glided past and under the billiard room windows, was observantly noted by Lord Brandymere from over a cribbage-board within, at the other side of which Mr. Hollister was fast becoming drowsier and drowsier in his play from the de ths of the great leather-upholstered easy-chair in which he was seductively ensconced.

All unaware of this, and yet Avice unaccountably came to a hesitating pause at the edge of the deserted terrace, for all that the glimmer of Jack's cigar was discernible from amid the semi-luminous mistiness at the foot of the lawn, where he was doubtless awaiting her tryst with even more than his accustomed impatience.

Why did she thus pause and linger? She could not have told herself. We are mysteries even to ourselves, and our premonitions of steps big with importance, or fatality, in our future lives, even on the threshold of taking them, are as inexplicable as the air-drawn tissues of a dream. If it was such a mysterious foreboding that momentarily held Avice Hollister captive now, the internal promptings to the snapping of the spell were none the less urgent and imperative.

Money and power were her goal, and if the Rubicon of her destiny rolled dark and threatening between her and its attainment, there was a phantom of terror no less before her than behind. The wronged youth, Baylis, it was true, had passed irrevocably into the eternal silences, with that muteness as to her own instrumentality in his undoing whose undeserved magnanimity still mocked her from his elimination. But her uncle's suspicions, already vaguely aroused, might at any moment receive the touchstone guidance to the truth. Her minor victim, Maggy

McMann, might yet win some credence to her protests and denunciations, as being something more than cunning ravings of a conscious guilt, from the depths of her prison cell. And there was the master phantom of the Detective Expert himself, a chance unintercepted whisper of which could so effectually undo all for which she had so plotted and planned and sinned.

With a swift, half-furious movement, Avice seemed to annihilate the halting spell that was on her steps and her determination.

Then, flitting down over the wet lawn like a companion shadow among the shadows of the dim-lighted mists, she was at Jack's side at the little seat and table among the evergreens.

"Ah," with a low, amused laugh, "you were bound to be good to yourself while waiting, at all events," with a gesture toward a bottle of champagne and some glasses on the table, while several other bottles peeped from a silvered cooler on the ground at his side.

Jack, who was also well-costumed against the dampness of the evening, shrugged his shoulders half-contentedly.

"To be sure, my dear girl," he replied, ceremoniously filling two glasses, while she nestled confidentially on the opposite bench, with her elbows on the intervening board. "Knowing from experience your unique punctuality in keeping appointments, I managed to smuggle these things down here as a provision against possible delays. It is Pommery *sec*, my dear. Try it."

CHAPTER XXV.

MORE OF THE TRYST.

"Don't attempt the satirical, my dear Jack, for it is hardly your *forte*," observed Avice, accepting the proffered glass with business-like promptness. "Otherwise, there is a piquancy about your little treat out here in the moonny mistiness that is not without its charm. Rather tell me if you have remarked anything out on the river yonder as yet."

Jack discontentedly tossed off his wine, and then looked, with another shrug of his broad shoulders, out upon the wide water, upon which the moonshine and the mists in conjunction were making many picturesque effects of the going and coming, rising and vanishing variety.

"What could I see out yonder?" he asked, grumblingly. "Yes, for that matter, I saw Long Peters row into his ferry-house, down thereaway under Lover's Seat Rock, twenty minutes ago. But what would you expect me to see? Not," sarcastically, "Rod Marjoram himself, I hope, rowing over from Nyack with the budget of news for Uncle Hal that is as like as not to make beggars of us two?"

"Why not, if it would give us the chance we are looking for to intercept him?" cried Avice, in her low, thrilling and intense way that he found so strangely and unaccountably startling, or suggestive, as the case might be. "And surely," somewhat more constrainedly, "if the accursed detective were contemplating such a visit to-night, there is no place he would be more likely to land than directly opposite us, across the railroad tracks yonder."

"Don't, Avice!" murmured Jack, moving uncomfortably in his seat.

"What are you talking about, Jack? Don't what?"

"Why—talk so cold-bloodedly about intercepting the man, as if you meant or were willing to murder him! At least," with a nervous laugh, "I suppose that is what I mean."

"Indeed?" quietly, and eying him in the peculiar way that he had found on a previous occasion so uncomfortable.

"Yes; and then he isn't an accursed detective either, that I know of, even if he is opposed to our interests."

"He is so opposed to them—to the death!" exclaimed Avice, with quiet deadliness, "and for that reason I sincerely hope he may be accursed—that is, if he isn't dead, which is too good to believe."

"There you go again! Avvy, you fairly and horribly give the lie to your loveliness in the avowal of such murderous sentiments."

"A truce to mawkish timidity, Jack Sterling," she replied, energetically, "when boldness if not ruthless desperateness itself, should solely be to the front! Look here, my dear, we are not here to-night as lovers, but to discuss our prospects, which are in sufficient danger of annihilation."

Jack winced a little, though his brow was darkening in a manner to reassure her.

"Very well then," he said, slowly and interrogatively.

"First, tell me if Uncle Hal threw out any fresh convincing hint to you on the occasion of your going to the house where that unhappy wretch, young Baylis, had been boarding."

"Yes, he did," resentfully.

"To what end?"

"Oh, he'll just marry Bertha Forrest off-hand and with a rush, should he ever have the chance. There is no longer any doubt of that!"

"You are convinced of that?"

"Am I? The deuce! that young woman is as thoroughly fixed in the governor's rejuvenated imagination as—as—"

"As she perhaps was at one time in yours!" with her soft laugh.

Jack made a grimace.

"That's hardly fair, Avicé—especially at this time of day."

"Let it go, then," gently. "The main point is that Uncle Hal is as thoroughly in love with the young woman as a man of his age can well be, and will unquestionably marry her if she is alive and will have him?"

"To a dot."

"Well, then, we will next assume that she won't fail to accept the offer if she is given the chance."

"We may assume it, yes, though there is no certainty of anything of the sort. Bertha Forrest is a mighty independent young woman."

"Good, then," with an impatient gesture.

"That much assumed, there is only this fact—mind you, Jack, not another assumption, but a fact—that Rod Marjoram, if still alive, fully intends that she shall have the chance, and that just as soon as he can bring it about."

"How do you know that, Avicé?" demanded Jack, restlessly replenishing the glasses. "Here, my dear, let us drink again. That's the talk," as she complied, touching her glass to his, with her slow, peculiar smile. "I mean, how do you know it for a certainty?"

"Through certain dying declarations made to Uncle Hal by young Baylis in my presence."

"What!" cried Jack, excitedly; "could he give you away in the abduction affair, then?"

"Of course, he could, had he chosen to. But for some unexplained reason, for which I cannot be sufficiently grateful, he did not. That young Englishman wasn't half a bad fellow, Jack, with a passing regretfulness. In other days, which are happily no more for us, he might have been called chivalric. But he said enough on the point under consideration."

"Tell me just what he did say, Avicé."

She did so, to the best of her recollection.

Jack ground his teeth and clinched his hands with renewed fury over what Baylis had declared as to the Detective Expert's determination.

"It's too bad—too infernally bad!" he exclaimed. "By Jupiter! it is downright enmity. I can't think what I have ever done to Rod Marjoram that can justify him, even in his own mind, for antagonizing my worldly interests in this outrageous manner."

"Still," with ironical demureness, "he may consider it a case of wronged beauty in distress, you know—another relic from the age of chivalry, perhaps—besides intending it all for the best. In that case, of course, we are powerless to help ourselves, and you know it wouldn't do to interrupt his praiseworthy purpose now, even if the opportunity were afforded us."

Jack Sterling dashed his fist on the rustic table, filled the glasses again, reached for and knocked the neck off a fresh bottle, all in a species of modified frenzy.

"Why are we powerless to help ourselves—at least quite so, as yet?" he angrily demanded, in the course of these irritable performances. "And who talked of cowardly permitting the treacherous hound to have his uninterrupted way in the design that is to beggar us?"

"You did," she cried, in answer to the last question first, "when you stigmatized my sensible talk of intercepting his ingrate purpose as unworthy and murderous!"

Jack drained off his glass, and, leaning back, thrust his hands deeply in his pockets, with his chin on his breast.

"Perhaps I did," he admitted, in a low voice. "However," desperately, "the man's design, if such it is, must be frustrated, or we are goners, and no mistake."

"Of course it must, as I have already insisted," she replied, somewhat abstractedly, and with her gaze directed wandringly out over the water, with its blending mists and beams. "But why go over all this again? He must and shall be intercepted, at any cost, and even if the present moment should prove the one of action."

"What are you looking at?" he demanded, looking up in surprise at her change of tone.

"A mere speck, as yet," she replied, quietly. "Jack, if you had only brought the night-glass with you!"

"But I did bring it on a chance. Here it is!" producing the glass.

"It is he!" she said, composedly, after a brief examination.

"Who?" And he looked up with a start.

"Your whilom good friend," sarcastically, "Three-fingered Joram, the Detective Expert. Ha, ha!"

"Pshaw! you couldn't possibly make him out at that distance."

"Perhaps not, but I would swear it is he—Jack, I feel it!"

They waited impatiently until the speck on the waters, which was evidently approaching, became a boat, the speck within it a man, and that man to all appearances the detective.

At last there could be little further doubt about it, even in the uncertain light that was prevailing, and they saw him make fast at a point down almost directly across the tracks from their position.

"Jack," said Avicé, laying her firm hand on his arm, "he will pass up this path. You must make him take a glass of wine with us. Leave the rest to me."

CHAPTER XXVI.

"A PINCH OF GRAY POWDER."

A NEW terribleness in the voice with which the seemingly commonplace words were pronounced, though in little more than a whisper, impressed Jack Sterling even more powerfully than the accompanying touch on his arm; though if he could have guessed the nature of the little packet of grayish powder in Avicé's bosom, and which her disengaged hand had instinctively sought at the same time in its place of concealment, the fellingness of her purpose might have been yet more apparent in its significance.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, involuntarily; "how you look!"

"How, then?" she gravely asked.

"Like—like a devil!" faltered the young man.

She smiled, which in some measure modified or softened the stern and set look which had hardened over the dark loveliness of her countenance.

"And now?" she queried, with just a tinge of contemptuous mockery.

"That is an improvement," he grumbled.

"But look here, Avicé," uneasily, "what do you propose to do?"

"Do?" she elevated her brows. "Haven't I said? Is there any harm in our old-time playmate, Rod Marjoram, being asked to take a glass of this wine with us under the misty moon, as I have proposed?"

"Oh, no; not if that is all."

She suddenly grasped his arm, as he was about rising, and leaned forward, her eyes burningly fixed on his face.

"All!" she echoed, eagerly. "Tell me, Jack, are you sufficiently brave—dare you propose more—a bold and violent stroke at this very moment? The spot and hour are sufficiently solitary—he is alone—perhaps off his guard and exhausted, into the bargain, after the accident of the afternoon, together with this long pull across-stream! Are you game for it?"

He roughly shook off her hand.

"No, no!" he gasped. "Good God! what are you talking about?"

"Nothing!" sinking back, with a low laugh, as sweet and musical as had ever issued through the ripe perfection of her lips. "Hist, Jack! he is coming up the path. Speak him fairly, and leave the rest to me. Who knows but we may yet win him over to our views?"

The Detective Expert's light but firm tread was already heard on the steep little path running up over the abrupt rise of the lawn out of the railroad cutting and close beside the ever-green clump.

Jack at once stepped out and accosted him with his festive offer, together with some commonplace congratulations over his escape from the afternoon's accident.

Marjoram seemed not a little disconcerted, as though the interruption were no less distasteful than unexpected, but he quickly rallied his assurance to the rescue.

"What, Miss Hollister on the lookout for me, too?" he exclaimed, advancing toward the table.

"Well, this is something like a surprise, to be sure."

She cordially extended to him the same hand with which, an instant before, she had deposited a liberal pinch of the grayish powder of the tiny package into her own freshly emptied glass, which she at the same time held out to him, while Jack unsuspectingly brimmed it, together with his own, with the sparkling and creamy amber of the rich wine.

The written directions had prescribed, or cautioned, "an infinitesimal quantity" as necessarily fatal; but Avicé Hollister was taking no chances of failure, and had made use of a more than liberal pinch.

"You are like the newly risen from the dead, Mr. Marjoram," she cried, gayly, "though both Jack and I were sure you could not have been drowned. Welcome! and here is my own glass for you for lack of another and better."

The Expert appeared to be agreeably surprised at her unwonted courtliness.

"You can 'drink to me—to me with thine eyes,' at all events," he smilingly replied, touching his glass to Jack's and forthwith draining it, with an obeisance to herself. "Ah!" with a slight grimace; "refreshing enough after my long pull, to be sure, though a trifle bitter, is it not?"

"Bitter?" cried Jack, the bottle still in his hand. "Nonsense! Why, it is the governor's best Pommery *sec*! Try it again." And he once more brimmed the glasses.

"Ah! that is better, or most likely a fault of my taste at first."

And, emptying his glass again, Rod allowed himself to be drawn upon the bench at Jack's side, with the smiling and secretly observant Avicé directly opposite, after which he began without solicitation his story of escape from the wreck in Miss Forrest's company quite glibly.

Their boat had not suffered so severely as had been supposed, and directly after the collision a

favoring current had swept it out under the fog toward the shore.

"You are not yet aware of poor Baylis's death, then?" Jack gravely interrupted at last.

The detective looked up in genuine amazement and grief.

"Good heavens! you can't mean it?" he exclaimed; and he listened with a shocked expression as Jack briefly narrated the pathetic details. "We missed him at once," he then continued, "but made certain that he would be picked up by your yachtsmen, with no more than a ducking. I had come to like the young fellow greatly, and he had many fine qualities. This is bad, bad!"

They went on talking over the melancholy affair for several moments.

In the mean time, Avicé, under her smiling demeanor, was in such an agony of suspense and impatience as can be readily understood.

"Why doesn't the man die?" she kept saying to herself over and over again. "Is he of cast iron, instead of the flesh and blood which should from the first moment have felt the swift death of the acid in its every artery and vein? or can I have duped myself with a harmless powder, after all?"

At last her nervous impatience became more or less apparent, and Jack, ascribing it to his tardiness in approaching the subject so vitally important to them both, broke out abruptly:

"Look here, Rod, you were on your way up to the house, I suppose?"

"Of course," was the composed and guarded reply.

"To what especial purpose, allow me to ask?"

"Why, to carry with me my discovery of Miss Forrest's whereabouts, old fellow, as a matter of course."

"You had three several commissions to that end, I believe—from my cousin here, myself and Uncle Hal respectively?"

"That is true."

"Humph! And to which were you designing to convey the desired intelligence first, individually?"

"To Mr. Hollister, as a matter of course," promptly.

"And why as a matter of course, pray? Did his commission have the claim of priority?"

"No, just the reverse as to that," coolly. "I was going to impart my information first to him, as a matter of respect."

"Rod Marjoram," cried Jack, angrily, "to say nothing of my Cousin Avicé here, who also commissioned you to the search before Uncle Hal did, you are playing me false and underhandedly in this matter, and you know it!"

"Indeed? Suppose you explain yourself, my friend."

Jack attempted to do so, but with very poor success.

Apart from his bad temper, which is so little conducive to clearness of expression, he was naturally at a loss to adequately set forth a grievance which he knew to be grounded solely on the simplest and basest of mercenary motives.

"Do not mince words, Jack!" angrily and contemptuously exclaimed Avicé, coming boldly to his rescue. "Rod Marjoram, our grievance is just this: You are bent on undermining us. You are resolved on bringing Uncle Hal and this young woman together, that he may marry her if she will have him, and so ruin our heretofore secure prospects as his sole heirs."

The expert looked at her with unqualified approval, not unmixed with admiration, and unblushingly bowed his assent.

"Well, and truly charged!" he replied, in his soft, earnest way; "and, as coming from one who systematically plotted the ruin of the pure character in question, right frankly advanced. I always have admired hardihood, Miss Hollister, even when possibly stimulated to the surface by sheer desperation, and you have my congratulations."

"What!" roared Jack, in impotent rage, but with clinched fists and eyes flashing dangerously; "you admit your treachery, then?"

The detective coolly turned his attention to him, with a withering and yet commiserating, or compassionating look.

"Now for you, Jack," said he, slowly. "Whatever hypocrisy prompted Miss Hollister's pretended commissioning me to a search for that of which she was thoroughly cognizant from the outset, your commission was given me in good faith, and deserves an honest accounting on my part."

"You charge me with contemplating treachery to you. It is false, save only as I have rightly used my privilege of betraying you in the defense of one whom you would have doubly betrayed; not only in her affections" (Jack winced,) "which you villainously won only that you might cast them aside at the first dastardly whisper of detriment to your moneyed interest, but likewise in her woman's reputation, of whose spotlessness none could be better aware than yourself—especially of late," with a sarcastic glance from one to another of his opponents—"but which you would willingly have permitted to remain darkened through equally base mercenary considerations."

"Shame on you! If I have stood by wronged and defenseless innocence, in preference to our ancient friendship—if I have chosen to oppose treachery to treachery, fire to fire, in that same cause, let the world compare your conduct with mine as it will, I am satisfied in my own conscience. You are answered."

They could not find words with which to answer him, and, with a disdainful gesture, he turned abruptly away.

CHAPTER XXVII.

"A DEAD HEART MUST NEEDS BE BOLD."

NOT a dozen paces up the path, however, the detective was seen to suddenly clutch his stomach convulsively, and then, half-doubled up as with writhing internal pain, to grasp a small tree for support.

"What can be the matter with him?" whispered Jack, his resentment giving way for the moment to intense astonishment.

"Hush!" was Avie's whispered reply, with her terrible smile, in which a wild exultance, which was no less incomprehensible to him, was also apparent. "Hush! and—wait."

But, the result was other than she anticipated, for the detective was presently seen to straighten himself up with an air of relief; after which, abruptly quitting the house-path, he proceeded swiftly across the face of the lawn toward a grove that crowned the low-sloping ground overlooking the railroad cut to the southward.

Jack drew a long breath of relief, and at the same time looked inquiringly at his fair companion.

She shook her head, with an expression of bitter disappointment.

"He is only going off in that direction to mislead us," she said. "Within less than half an hour he will have communicated his secret to Uncle Hal at the house, or have arranged to meet him outside, with the same end in view, by appointment. I feel it! A short enough respite for us, Jack?"

"I should say so!" stamping his foot. "The devil seize him!"

"We must be our own devils in this age, Jack; especially if we would help ourselves against a hard-staring ruin of this kind."

There was again the accompanying look and inflection to startle him, though he did not shrink from their hidden deadliness quite so instinctively as theretofore.

"What shall we do, Avie?" he demanded.

"There is but one remaining chance of intervention between that sentimental marplot's design and our ruin, if you will obey my instructions. Will you do it?"

"Yes."

"Return then instantly to the house, and if possible, try to get Uncle Hal off to bed before Rod can arrive or send for him."

"I'll do it, if I have to make him drunk first, with Brandymer into the bargain!" half turning to go. "But in the mean time what will you do?" seeing that she remained standing by the table.

"Go at once, without question. Like enough I shall have business elsewhere."

Without another word, he went off up through the moony mistiness toward the house.

Avie waited impatiently till he had disappeared, with her eyes fastened ominously on the grove, dreamy and unreal-looking in the uncertain light, in which the detective had vanished.

"The poison could not have been genuine, or may have lost its potency," she muttered. However!

Her eyes gleamed, and, with a rapid, graceful movement, the jewel-bilted bodkin was transferred from the back of her head into her resolute clutch.

Then, muffling herself more closely in her voluminous wrap, she seemed about to spring glidingly on the hated Expert's trail with the instinctive unerringness of a bloodhound on its fugitive's track, when she was once more arrested by the strange halting spell that had possessed her so unaccountably at the terrace above.

What could it mean? She glanced about her inquiringly—at the rustic table, the empty or half-emptied bottles, the wine-cooler, the deserted seats—lingering again, and yet once more not knowing why she lingered, and angry that she did so. What was it? Her bygone purity's second instinctive pause on the threshold of beckoning crime? Her innocent girlhood's warning whisper out of the vanished past, when her soul was fresh, and deceit or intrigue unknown to her young life? The arresting touch of an Invisible Hand—perhaps of the spirit mother whose earthly seeming she scarcely remembered—stretched out yearningly from the unknown infinite to beseech, to plead with, and to save? Or only a blind shuddering, mute protest on the part of her better nature, still kindling feebly under the smothering weight of pride, of waywardness, and of a heart in ashes?

Alas! she did not and she would not know. But, with a last disdainful wrench, she burst once more the piteous saving spell, and it was destined never again to assert its blessed but ineffectual dominion over her wayward spirit.

"What glamour is upon me?" muttered Avie,

with a furious, self-contemptuous movement. "Pshaw! I ought to be ashamed of myself to forget that a dead heart must needs be bold—and evermore he bold!"

And, with the saving spell irrevocably in moral shreds and tatters behind her, and with the small, keen dagger clutched yet more resolutely under the light-floating and light billowing concealment of her gossamer-like mantle, she was flitting silently, stealthily, swiftly across the lawn, and amid the moonbeams and the mistiness upon the benevolent detective's track, relentless, heedless of all save the security of vengeance, heedless of the risk of it, the sin of it, the crime of it—and yes, heedlessly unaware of being shadowed in her turn, of a no less resolute and persistent spy upon her own remorseless track.

She seemed to take up the trail by a species of unerring instinct.

It had been several minutes since Rod's disappearance into the grove, and yet she selected a certain intricate path that led off among the trees, and pursued it with as perfect a confidence as if she had his retreating figure still in sight.

She had long been familiar with this path. It led through the woods for a considerable distance, then across the railroad cutting by an old but still substantial rustic foot-bridge, and thence up and out upon the wooded summit of a tall and boldly precipitous promontory, with a romantic rustic bench at the supreme shelf overlooking the swirling, rock-fretted river-shallows a hundred or more feet in sheer descent below, from which, or from ancestral rustic seats of a similar significance, it had obtained its name of Lovers' Seat Rock from time immemorial.

It was not a long path, but an intricate and picturesque one, with numerous odd, unexpected turns, dips, clamberings and surprises, here into a pretty dingle, there over a miniature wold, thereaway again through a soft glade, or over a quaint stile, or through a musical brook by stepping-stones, or by this or that ravine, opening, nook, niche, clump, copse, bosquet, wildflower bank, or what not, each with a more or less characteristic name of its own, with all of which she had been as familiar in her happy girlhood as a wood-nymph with her charmed haunts, or a wild bird with its larva-rife treasure-nooks.

But it was with far sterner and less innocent thoughts that Avie Hollister, as beautiful woman-grown, now swiftly threaded that winding woodland-path.

At last the sound of guarded voices reached her ear, and, advancing more cautiously, she presently, not a little to her surprise, came upon a little glade, rendered comparatively luminous by the misty down-pour of the moon, wherein the detective was in conversation with Barker, her uncle's butler, or head-footman.

His chance presence in the wood, however, was explained by the flutter of a woman's skirt not far away, and before its owner quite disappeared. Avie recognized her as a comely kitchen-maid to whom Barker was generally understood to have long paid assiduous court.

The two men had evidently thus met, so opportunely for the Detective Expert at least, but a few moments before, for the butler was saying, with no little humbleness of manner, for him:

"Indeed, sir, 'ad I suspected your true character, I'd never 'ave ventured on hany disagreements with you in the 'ouse'old, and I beg you'll take me at my word."

"I do so, and it is all right now, Barker, I assure you," was the detective's genial response. "But now, you can do me a signal service, if you will."

"Let it but 'ave a name, sir."

"There are reasons why I do not want to be seen about the house as yet, Barker. You can carry a secret message there for me."

"Is that hall? With hall my 'eart, Mr. Marjoram! Is it to Mr. 'ollister himself? I'll give 'im the tip in less than no time, sir."

"No," Rod slowly answered, as if considering. "It will be safer for me to communicate with my aunt, Mrs. Marjoram, first."

"Hat once, sir. Wat shall I say?"

"Merely that I await her here, and that she must come to me as secretly as possible."

Barker hurried away, was seen to be rejoined by his female companion, and then disappeared with her.

Joram, left to himself, found a seat at the mossy foot of an old tree, and waited, it seemed with a sense of weariness rather than impatience.

To him, also, the picturesque silvan attractions strung along that old winding path were familiar enough, since Craggsby had been almost as much his boyhood's summer home as Avie's or Jack's. But he now bowed his head on his hand, and his thoughts were doubtless more seriously occupied than with the associations suggested by the dim and sweet old wood around him, so eerie and yet inviting just now in the mystic drip of the moonshine.

It seemed a wonder that he should not be aware of a silent, threatening presence all but hovering over him in that solitary space of waiting.

It was Avie. The detective had chanced to select for his resting-place the foot of the very tree behind whose gnarled trunk she had slipped

for concealment. The delicate little dagger, which at a sudden, forceful stroke might so readily reach his life from behind, was still clutched vengefully beneath her mantle, and there might not come a safer, more solitary opportunity for the deadly deed than now; and yet, either through curiosity over the approaching interview, or from some other cause, she did not take advantage of it, but continued hovering there, watchful and silent, the blade still grasped uselessly in her hesitant hand.

It was not far from the manor-house to this spot, and in a short space of time Mrs. Marjoram made her appearance in response to her nephew's message.

"Do not waste time in useless exclamations, aunt," said Joram, after greeting her with an affectionate kiss and embrace. "I am safe and sound, as you perceive, and I have sent for you first because I feared Barker's blundering with a message direct to Mr. Hollister. Is the old gentleman abed yet?"

"Why, no, my dear, since it is not yet nine o'clock," was the reply. "Though to be sure he he is fast asleep in an easy-chair in the billiard-room."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

LOVERS' SEAT ROCK.

"In the billiard-room, you say?" queried the detective, in surprise.

"Yes," was the housekeeper's reply, "over a cribbage board at which he was playing a game with Lord Brandymer before dropping off to sleep."

"And where is Brandymer now?—Pray understand, aunt, that I am in a rather precarious situation in which the smallest item of information may be of use to me."

"Lord, Roddy, is that so? But I suppose it's the common way with you detective chaps to be away down deep and mysterious even with no-account trifles."

"Yes, yes!" impatiently. "Don't waste time, aunt."

"Not for the world, my dear. Well, then, I don't know where Lord Brandymer is. I saw him mixing a brandy and soda for himself half an hour or so ago, perhaps directly after Mr. Hollister dropped off; but whether he went to bed or out for a stroll after that I can't say."

"Humph! And where are Miss Hollister and Jack?"

"Avie is perhaps in her room with one of her headaches. Leastwise she was feeling bad over that dreadful happening to poor Mr. Baylis, and her maid seems to have her liberty among the other servants."

"Ah! and Jack?"

"He came back to the house from somewhere just a little before Mr. Barker brought me your message."

"So! and what is he doing?"

"Just wandering about the billiard-room idly, and smoking."

"Aha! with an eye upon Mr. Hollister, perhaps?"

"Very likely, though why the good old gentleman should need Jack's eye on him, and he a-drowsing in his chair as peaceful as a baby, I can't exactly see."

"Aunt, it is to be on the watch that I don't communicate the secret of Miss Forrest's whereabouts to the old gentleman."

"Bless me, Roddy! is that so? But I begin to understand it a little."

"That is well. Now listen, aunt. I must communicate with Mr. Hollister, secretly, and with as little delay as possible. Can you convey a message to him, do you think, without arousing Jack's suspicions?"

"Dear me, I don't know, but I can try. But why all this mystification, my dear?"

"It is necessary, aunt, and time is precious," impatiently. "How will you manage it?"

"Well, let me see. I might go up to Avvy's rooms, and, if she is not asleep yet—"

"You wouldn't find Miss Avie there. Don't ask for explanations, but think of some other plan."

"Avie not in her rooms! Dear me! Well, then, I might bring Jack and Lord Brandymer together for a game of billiards, or something of the sort."

"And Mr. Hollister himself asleep in the billiard-room! However, that might answer, or you must manage it in some other way."

"Trust me for that, my dear."

"But the utmost secrecy must be preserved, aunt."

"Leave it to me, Roddy. What is your message for Mr. Hollister?"

"Merely to the effect that I must confer personally with him to-night—at once—and say at the Lovers' Seat Rock."

"What! with his rheumatics, and on such a damp evening?"

"Yes, yes; he will come gladly enough, never fear. But he must come with the most absolute secrecy, and you will probably have to help in that. Here!" he handed her a slip of paper; "this contains Miss Forrest's address. But you are to give it to Mr. Hollister only as a last resort, in case of his finding it impossible to come to me with the requisite amount of secrecy."

Keep this thoroughly in mind. Now, do you understand?"

"I'll manage it, Roddy. But do kiss me again, my dear. You can't imagine how I have suffered since that accident, my dear. It was just awful, and ever since then I have been fearing that you were dead."

"You poor old darling! At the very first chance I will tell you all about it. There, there!"

And, with a parting embrace of much heartiness, he dismissed her upon her errand, after which he himself glided off through the wood, in the direction of the spot he had appointed.

Avice slipped out from behind the tree, and stood for a brief space in the moonlight, in her hand the written slip of paper, which she had cleverly succeeded in abstracting from the housekeeper's pocket at the last moment.

"Why did I not strike him to the heart when he was at my mercy?" she thought. "However, a better opportunity may await me."

Her sight was so keen that she had no difficulty in deciphering the written words, even by that uncertain light.

Having done so she smiled, secured the paper, and then silently took up her fell pursuit once more.

Arriving at her destination at last, she found the detective already at the rustic seat.

It was a romantic and yet perilous spot.

He was half-reclining on the bench, with folded arms, his gaze directed out upon the shining, partly misted surface of the watery expanse. The trees whispered mysteriously around and overhead. The seat was almost at the edge of the precipice, which, with a wild growth of bushes fringing the brink, just at this point made a sheer, perpendicular descent of a hundred feet or more. But a little further along the face of the rock, was more sloping and broken, with a sinuous stair-like path winding and zig-zagging down it, which both Avice and her prospective victim had often threaded in earlier days, laughing at its difficulties, or with a pleasing fear in the very perils that were courted. Back in among the trees there was a rising rock, or series of rocks, which partly jutted over one end of the seat.

It was partly behind this lesser rock that Avice Hollister concealed herself at this juncture, within less than arm's-length of her unconscious foe.

She was fully determined upon the murder. And she felt a terrible rejoicing that she had not made the tragic essay before—that she had waited for this master opportunity.

Could she but summon up the requisite nerve, she had but to lean stealthily over the back of the seat, strike home once, and after that a hard push would doubtless suffice to send the lifeless body plunging down into the abyss, where the swirling waters would scarcely fail to speedily carry it far away on the throbbing and secret tide.

No time must be lost either, for her uncle might already be hastening to the tryst, which, if once consummated, would be, she was satisfied, to the ruin of her hopes.

But, in spite of her masterful resolve, and the headlong steps with which she had descended to this turpitude, Avice was still new enough to crime to hesitate yet again on the threshold of this terrible deed.

She was very pale, but with her lips compressed, her face set and hard.

She glanced once again out upon the peaceful moonlight scene—the broad sweep of the bright waters, the shadowy down-curve of the far-away opposite highlands, the nearer restfulness of the surrounding trees and rocks, with their placid aspects, their soft whisperings, the silently weird shiftiness of blending shadow and shine.

Could it really be the same as that out of which she had woven her girlish fancies and reared her little fairy fabrics in the bygone days that seemed as if but yesterday?

Moreover, what a strangely exposed spot for a murder, apparently in the very face of dream-creating creation!

But not a sail was visible on the waters, not the twinkle of a night-lamp from an embowered casement in the distance, and the pensive, waiting figure on the bench, too, it might also be asleep or dreaming, so careless and unconscious was its attitude.

Now or never!

She drew a long, silent breath, noiselessly threw back her mantle, leaned over the figure, and then raised aloft the dagger with a resolute, unflinching hand.

What exactly happened after that—immediately after that—Avice Hollister never knew.

She had a confused, dreamy consciousness of the detective's brave, unstartled eyes suddenly meeting hers at the critical moment—of the blade descending and breaking on the back of the bench, and the treacherous hilt flying out of her hand—of her intended victim starting up and seizing both hilt and blade—then of a sudden toppling over on him of a huge fragment of the overhanging rock, hurling him back irresistibly toward the fatal edge.

Then there was the shadowy recollection of the crowning horror of it all.

She was over the bench and after him with a half-shriek, not to kill, but to assist, to save, but too late.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AFTERWARD.

THEN she was leaning dizzily over the cliff, looking down after the man's body and the stony fragment in their crashing plunge into the depths.

She seemed to remain there a long time—long after both fragment and body had disappeared with a double splash, and the swirling waters had resumed their accustomed tranquillity under the dancing beams.

She arose at last, slowly rallying her faculties with a mingled sense of horror, of satisfaction, and of thankfulness, but, to her credit be it said, most of all of gratitude.

He was dead, he, her enemy, and yet she had not killed him! The chance toppling of the rock, the purest accident, was alone responsible; her desperate hand was as yet unstained with murder, and her murderous desire was none the less an accomplished fact.

Then nothing would do but she must descend the face of the cliff by the perilous stair-like path—to make sure, or to lend a rescuing hand if there might be time, which?

She hardly knew, but she could no more have resisted the impulse to go down the path at that moment, had her life depended on it.

There was that much of true womanliness reasserting itself in her composition, up out of the gulfs of her steadily self-wrought deterioration, even if it had to fight a devil amid the ruins of a heart in ashes to win its way to the top.

In another moment she was on the ladder-like path. Its perils had not diminished with time, and, with all her perfection of robust womanly symmetry and grace, she was no longer the sylph-like, light-footed girl that had fearlessly braved its slippery terrors of old. No, but she was strong, dauntless and powerful still, as an offset to her weight of frame, and she was, moreover, inspired by the magic of an over-mastering excitement thrilled by the steadying rod of her iron will.

There was many a slip and many a recovery in the course of the descent, but at last it was accomplished.

And to what purpose?

She stood on the little boulder-strewn point of sandy beach at the foot of the path, and looked dreamily around—at the water, the sheer face of the precipice, henceforth so tragic for her, at the little cottage and boat-house combined of Long Peters, the lone night-ferryman of the locality, among their bowing, water-side trees, on a more accessible point jutting out just a little higher along the river-bank than Lovers' Seat Rock itself, of whose promontory it, nevertheless, formed a part.

Could the miserable victim (accident's victim, not hers, let that never be forgotten, she kept repeating over and over again in her secret soul) have reached that shelter alive?

Impossible! Not a light, not an indication of life or wakefulness about the well-remembered, solitary little domicile. Besides, had she not seen him disappear, together with the falling fragment, beneath the waves, and watched in vain for a reappearance upon the moonlighted surface?

She retraced her steps, the ascent of the path being more toilsome but less perilous than the descent.

She had no sooner reached the top than voices and steps were heard approaching through the wood.

Her Uncle Hal's and Mrs. Marjoram's voices, too!

She effected her concealment without a fear as they came out upon the rocky platform thronging the Lovers' Seat, for neither the fall of the rock nor the evanishment of both man and fragment over the dizzy brink had left any unusual trace, and both Mr. Hollister and the housekeeper were comparatively unfamiliar with the spot.

"Hallo! no one here?" exclaimed Mr. Hollister, impatiently. He had muffled himself so unnecessarily against the damp that he was, moreover, panting and hot from the sultriness and his unwonted exercise. "How is this, ma'm?"

"I am sure I don't know, sir," replied Mrs. Marjoram, also wheezing at a great rate. "I only know that he told me to bring you here. But he was awful tired-looking. Let us see if he isn't drowsing somewhere's hereabouts."

"Nonsense!" peevishly. "The poor devil has more likely wearied of your dilly-dallying with the message, and gone off somewhere to bed. A pretty time of night to bring me out on this wild-geese chase!"

"How could I help it, I should like to know?" cried Mrs. Marjoram, tartly. "Do you think I like the disappointment any better than you do? Besides, I was to deliver the message in dead secrecy, or not at all. And what do you know of the trouble I had with starting Mr. Jack off to searching for Lord Brandymere before I could venture to wake you up and get you started?"

"Well, well, don't fly off the handle, ma'm."

We can go back again, I suppose, and Rod will doubtless turn up with his secret information in good season. Let me have the piece of writing you were to give me in case I should fail to see him."

The housekeeper thrust her hand in her pocket, agitatedly turned it inside out, and then shook and slapped her skirts despairingly.

"It's gone!" she wailed. "I must have lost it!"

"Lost it?" echoed Mr. Hollister, indignantly. "And it contained Miss Forrest's address, you say?"

"Yes, sir," feebly and humbly enough now, and while making another futile search of her person. "Rod said so when he gave it to me."

The old gentleman was angry enough, but checked himself as steps were heard coming.

"It's Jack himself," he muttered, hastily. "Never mind now, and keep your mouth shut, ma'm."

Jack came up, grumbling at having been sent on a fruitless search for Lord Brandymere, but at the same time eying both Mr. Hollister and the housekeeper suspiciously.

"Aren't you rather late in the day for this sort of romancing, you two?" he exclaimed, with an attempt at bantering. "I caught a glimpse of you—a nymph-like flutter of Mrs. Marjoram's classic skirt, ha, ha!—as you disappeared in the grove, and could not resist the temptation of following you up."

"Indeed!" snapped out Uncle Hal, in growing bad humor. "Well, you have your ungratified curiosity for your pains. Come, ma'm; the air is less inviting for a moonlight stroll than I anticipated, and we will return. Jack, you will come with us."

Jack halted, looking around lingeringly, for he was in an agony of suspense as to what might have become of Avice, and what she might be doing. But there was an unmistakable imperativeness in Mr. Hollister's voice and manner which he couldn't venture to defy, and it was equally certain that Rod Marjoram could not have communicated his secret as yet. He therefore turned and followed without audible demur.

Avice came out of her concealment in the open space, waiting.

Anxious as she was to confer with Jack with the least possible delay, it was none the less important that she should return to the house alone, and with nothing more than a suspicion that she had been out of it that night at all.

A glance at her watch showed her that it was not quite eleven.

She at last started back into the path at her accustomed brisk pace, then recoiled as Lord Brandymere coolly stepped out before her with an exultant smile.

"It is about time," he said. "My dear Miss Hollister, what a varied and up-and-down chase you have led me!"

For an instant she was incapable of answering him.

It was not merely the unexpectedness of this encounter that was so appalling, but rather a certain air of familiarity about the man that one might expect one's own shadow, suddenly materialized into a separate personality, to assume after such close and persistent attendance upon one, through various secret adventures, as only one's shadow could be supposed capable of.

"How—how long have you been tracking me?" she faltered.

"From the very first, my dear young lady," with phlegmatic equableness. He even put his monocle into his eye, and, producing a cigar, lighted it. "That is, to be more explicit, you know, from the moment of good Mr. Hollister falling to sleep over our game of cribbage; or say from five or six minutes after the inception of your little wine party with dear Cousin Jack at the foot of the lawn. But, do sit down, my dear girl; I want to make myself agreeable to you."

He indicated the adjacent seat with a quiet sense of command in his courtesy.

Had she still possessed her dagger, she would have been tempted to spring at his throat.

As it was, she quietly obeyed, but with her brain in a whirl.

CHAPTER XXX.

LORD BRANDYMER'S COUP.

ONCE seated, however, and even with this admirable embodiment of high-bred British insolence—who somehow brought to her mind Tennyson's "curled Assyrian bull" characterization in *Maud*—at her side, Avice's natural fearlessness and assurance began to speedily reassert themselves.

"So," she said, contemptuously, "you have really condescended to dog my steps to-night, to play the worthy part of a detective's shadow upon me?"

His lordship smiled, nodded and caressed his knee.

"Exactly, my dear," he suavely replied. "You see, I am diplomatic or nothing, and I really flatter myself, you know, that to-night I have made my *coup*."

"Which means, I suppose, that—that you have seen and heard—"

"All! Precisely, my dear. Everything,

from your edifying confab with dear Cousin Jack to—don't imagine that I admire you a particle the less for it; quite the contrary—to your murder of the marplot of a detective upon this spot."

"You are a liar, sir, and you know it!" with suppressed wrath. "There was no murder, but only—"

"But only an attempt, we will say. Have it so, and welcome," with a courteous gesture. "But remember, my dear—"

"We will say nothing of the kind, for it isn't the truth!" she indignantly interrupted in her turn. "And be warned in season, Lord Brandymer, with growing deadliness of tone, 'if you 'my dear' me, or adopt any similar offensiveness with me again, I shall be tempted to hurl you after the detective over yonder cliff, or, failing in that, to leave the marks of my nails upon your insolent face.'"

This seemed a prodigious joke to Lord Brandymer, who at once gave way to a roar of enjoyable laughter.

"It is too good, you know!" he exclaimed, when he had indulged his merriment to the full. "Miss Hollister," with deliberate impudence, "you are more than ever the woman of my heart, more than ever the woman I am determined to have for my wife. I swear it, my dear, my beauty, my darling!"

True to her threat, and fairly beside herself with rage, she flew at his throat, with a hoarse, inarticulate cry, lashing out scorchingly at his face with her bare hooked hands, glistening with rare rings, after first tearing off her gloves with a frenzied and inconceivably rapid movement.

But, how immensely strong and alert Lord Brandymer was!

In an instant she was powerless in his muscular grasp, and without a square inch of his florid comeliness having come to grief through the best of her tigrish intentions.

"Better and better, by Jawve!" he chuckled delightedly. "It beats jungle-hunting out and out, with no comparison as to the prize in view. My dear girl, are you going to be sensible, or must I wait for you to gnash out your rage in your own way? Wait!" And, to her further astonishment—or what would have been astonishment under less exasperating circumstances, he made free with her lips just once, and with a certain dignity and restraint that was wholly unaccountable. "Miss Hollister," with an entire change of tone, "that is the kiss of honor, the betrothing seal of the Brandymeres!"

Avice had ceased gnashing out her rage by this time.

"If you are a gentleman," she said, collectedly, "you will release me this instant, sir."

He at once complied, and she drew off to her end of the bench in such a mental and emotional frame as she had never conceived of as possible in her own case.

Lord Brandymer studiously looked out over the river, as if purposely to avoid witnessing her painful embarrassment, and smoked his cigar with unruffled composure.

Avice's face was on fire, her eyes full of indignant tears, her entire frame still painfully agitated.

But, as she gradually collected herself with her accustomed force of character, she wonderingly found herself studying her companion with a strange mixture of curiosity and speculation, from which the traces of her natural resentment were slowly and unaccountably eliminated.

What manner of man was this, who had treated her as no other man should have treated her and then lived, could she have prescribed and enforced the penalty, and yet whom she now found herself considering and analyzing so dispassionately and yet so interestedly?

And then that strange kiss, so self-contained, so respectful as it were, and yet out of the very whirlwind and tempest of possession and of such rioting exultance in which the best of men when fairly seized within its vortex, are commonly, if not pardonably, so brutish, or so reckless, or so lost to reason and propriety!

Noble, rich, handsome, unscrupulous, still young—he could scarcely yet be forty—good-natured, passably intelligent, domineering only in an off-hand, democratic way, his animalism not offensively prominent for an Englishman, brave, hardy, a man of the world, with little or none of the narrow, insular prejudices of his countrymen, and, above all, doubtlessly loving her, as she could not but believe, frankly, honestly, passionately, if coarsely, and—how unlike poor, vacillating, selfish Jack!—indubitably for herself alone, even with the black-thronging moral obliquities which he had surprised beyond the disguising in her composition, and without a care, more likely than not, whether she might come as her millionaire uncle's sole heiress or a beggar to his arms, if only she would come!

Might there not be a worse fate for her than to be this man's wife, if the worst should come to the worst?

But no, she would not think of that, she could not do so, with Jack still the idol of her imagination—though a somewhat tarnished one, as she secretly felt bound to confess—and with the marplot of a detective eternally mute and inactive at last.

However, she was not a little disconcerted by

Lord Brandymer slowly turning toward her at this juncture, with a smile of peculiar significance.

"You're not far out of the way, Miss Hollister," said he, as if divining the drift of her thoughts respecting himself. "I'm not a bad sort of fellow, after all, you know; and you really might seek further and do worse."

Avice bit her lip, and then rose resolutely.

"Lord Brandymer," she said, "I wish you to promise me something."

"Granted in advance," and he also rose and bowed. "But," with his frank smile, "say that you forgive me first."

"I shall try to forget, at all events," hesitatingly.

"Thanks; that will do. Now what would you demand of me, pray?"

"Your forbearance, sir—permission to return to the house at once, unaccompanied."

"You will not accept of my escort, Miss Hollister?"

"I prefer not to, sir."

He gave her a grand bow, and at the same time raising his hat.

"Have your wish," he said, earnestly; "and pray believe that I would sooner die than seriously offend you." And, as she turned to go, he added, in a soft but impressive voice: "Do not forget the kiss of honor—the betrothing seal of the Brandymeres!"

Avice hurried away along the solitary and shaded path with reddening cheeks, but somehow she felt perfectly assured that she would not be followed.

Arriving at the house, she reached her rooms without being observed; and then it was with an additional sense of relief that she assured herself that Dorton had gone to bed, more than likely ignorant of her mistress's absence from the house.

Her uncle, together with Mrs. Marjoram and pretty much all the rest of the household, seemed to have also retired, though she had not failed to remark a light in Jack's chamber window, as a sign that he was restlessly awaiting word from her.

She threw off her hat and wrap, waited till she heard Lord Brandymer come in and go to his room, which was in a comparatively distant wing; and then, after waiting yet a little longer to make reasonably sure that he was settled for the night, she stole to her cousin's door, which was not far from her room, and knocked.

He opened it almost instantly, wakeful and alert in anxious expectation of her coming.

"At last!" he exclaimed, in a low voice. "Come in. You needn't mind; my bedroom portiere is closed."

He had even been sitting at the window, with his hat on and his cigar between his teeth.

"No; come to my sitting-room with me," she said. "I think we can be more securely confidential there. Is that your light overcoat lying on that chair?"

"Yes."

"Bring it with you."

"What!" in amazed discontent; "surely not another outing for to-night?"

"Yes. Are you coming?"

He followed her without another word.

No sooner were they snugly ensconced under the lights in her dainty little sitting-room, or parlor, which adjoined her boudoir, than he marked the nervous excitement in her aspect.

"How strange you look!" he observed.

"What if I do?" she said, impatiently. "Would you have one always look the same, as if made of wood? Look you, Jack, our destiny is in our hands, provided we snatch it to-night."

"What's up?" he asked, with a half-stupid look.

"Everything. We must rout out Long Peters and cross to the Nyack side to-night. Are you ready to accompany me?"

"Oh, I suppose so; but what for?"

"To see and talk over Miss Forrest if possible."

"What! you have the secret of her new hiding-place?"

She handed him the stolen address.

It was to this effect:

"At Mrs. Glassman's, Upper Hardscrabble, Nyack."

"Why, this is magnificent!" exclaimed Sterling, suddenly livening up. "How did you come by this, Avvy?"

"All in good time. Shall we be able to seek out that address without much trouble?"

"To be sure. Upper Hardscrabble is a rocky, unfrequented road among the wild cliffs bordering the river a little to the south of the village, and almost directly back of where we were fishing."

"That is well." And Avice forthwith began putting on her discarded hat and cloak.

"But look here," said her cousin, with a slight return of his irresoluteness; "hold on!"

"Only for a few minutes, then. I do not propose to get 'left,' as the saying goes."

"That address is in the detective's handwriting."

"More than likely."

"How did you obtain it from him?"

"By a clever trick."

"But aren't you afraid of his forestalling us in this visit?"

"Not at all. It would be impossible."

"Why?"

"He is dead."

Jack looked at her with sudden horror and amazement.

"You mean it?" he gasped.

"Do I seem to be trifling?"

Something in her stern, set face seemed to rush upon the young man like a horrible revelation.

He suddenly grasped her wrist.

"Avice!" he muttered, hoarsely.

"Well?" unflinchingly.

"You have not murdered him?"

She angrily flung off his grasp.

"Truly, your opinion of me is highly flattering!" she replied. "Listen!"

She recounted faithfully every detail of her pursuit of Joram through the wood up to the moment of his disappearance over the precipice of Lovers' Seat Rock, with the single exception of her own attempt upon his life.

Jack sunk into a chair, still regarding her with a lingering distrust.

"Rod was my boyhood's other self—almost my brother!" he said, brokenly.

"And willingly enough the betrayer of your manhood's interests."

"Perhaps so; but this is simply horrible!"

"Granted; but none the less fortunate for us, as you must admit."

Then, as he still remained dazed or suspicious, she turned on him with sudden passion.

"Are you going with me, or must I go alone?" she angrily inquired.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AN EVENTFUL NIGHT.

JACK looked up doggedly in answer to the question.

"I don't know whether I am going with you or not," he replied. "I prefer some better explanation than you have yet vouchsafed me before I decide."

Avice restrained her angry impatience, and sat down; for she could not very well undertake the expedition without him, not being familiar with the locality to be visited.

"It strikes me that you are very unreasonable, Jack," she said, with less acerbity. "What more explanation can you want than what I have given you? Go on with your questions."

"Well," said Jack, slowly coming out of the first remorseful horror of the thing, "it seems to me mighty odd that the fragment of rock should fall against the man so—so opportunely and so coincidentally with our interests as in the manner you describe, unless—unless it was more or less assisted to that end, you know."

"Thank you! But the improbable none the less happened just as I have described it."

"What did you do afterward?" he asked.

She faithfully described her subsequent movements and experiences, save with regard to Lord Brandymer, which, after some mental deliberation, she totally eliminated.

Jack Sterling drew a long breath of at least partial relief.

Her description of the subsequent arrival upon the rock of Mr. Hollister, Mrs. Marjoram, and later on of himself, was so photographically correct, that it perhaps went far toward corroborating her relation of what had preceded it.

"Well, I must needs beg your pardon, Avice," he observed at last. "Though certainly this is all very extraordinary, no less than terrible."

"What good is there in your saying that?" she exclaimed, with renewed impatience. "Why do you not bestir yourself to accompany me?"

"Easily, easily, my dear girl! Since poor Rod is past interfering with us any further, why should we seek out the young woman in such precipitate haste?—and at this ungodly hour, into the bargain?"

She made a half-furious gesture, but restrained herself with an effort.

"You sometimes tempt me to think you but half a man, Jack!" she exclaimed. "You are ever like pitiful Macbeth—'letting I would not wait upon I would.'"

"Well, I don't purpose going off half-cocked, my dear."

"A valiant precaution! And pray, what more is wanting to full-cock your exemplary adventurousness?"

"Don't be so infernally sarcastic, Avice. In the first place, why should we be in such headlong haste in the matter, now, as there is no danger of Rod crossing us?"

"There is always danger of some crossing for those that linger."

"Well, that granted," uncomfortably, "there remains to consider our manner of talking over Miss Forrest, as you call it, even supposing she will pardon our waking her up at this unchristly hour."

"It will not be far from daybreak by the time we shall succeed in knocking up the ferryman, getting him started, crossing the river, locating the house, and all that. Besides, we must be back here betimes, before even the servants are

stirring, if possible. As for talking the young woman over," contemptuously, "leave that to me. You would naturally appear to—some disadvantage in the affair, as a matter of course."

"Thanks; I rather think I would. But look here. The idea is to start her off for Southern California, is it not?"

"To start her off for anywhere, provided it is in the unknown, and without delay."

"You may find more difficulty in that than you anticipate."

"Perhaps so; but I propose making the attempt as our last and only chance."

"But even if she should consent to disappear, money will be required."

"I have with me my savings from last winter and spring—fortunately to a considerable amount, as I was exceptionally economical with my allowances, though exactly why I was so must remain a mystery. I suppose it was in obedience to some sort of vague premonition of this sort of emergency. The amount is six hundred dollars."

"Humph! not bad to begin on."

"Of course, it will only be proffered as a beginning. With the young woman once safe in the unknown, beyond Uncle Hal's pursuit, I shall easily manage to send her more betimes."

"But the governor is hard hit. Don't forget that he might employ detectives."

"I don't forget that there is one detective—or was, rather, and the only one I ever feared—whom he never will employ."

"Poor Rod! Still, there remains to be considered—"

She interrupted him with a passionate gesture, and by starting abruptly to her feet.

"You pitiful man!" she exclaimed. "Am I to waste the fleeting moments with listening to the imaginary objections that your cowardly irresolution seems never weary of churning up out of the future? Can't you see what I am sacrificing for you, who are so little deserving?"

Jack flushed up.

"What are you doing, or sacrificing, for me any more than for yourself?" he growled.

"What, indeed?" she exclaimed, indignantly. "Dare you ask? Should Uncle Hal be permitted to marry again, and perhaps have an heir of his own, have you or I the most to fear as the result, I should like to know?—you, for whom he has never had more than a charitable fancy, or I, who am still his treasured niece, and may remain (only second to the prospective young wife, if no more) the apple of his eye?"

Jack, in view of the consequent exposure of Avice's methods (so much darker, if bolder, than his own) in the contingency she was holding up as a bugbear before him, might have questioned the justice of this belittling comparison. But he was not in a very critical mood just now, if indeed he ever was, and he only scratched his head, with a deprecating grimace.

"Well, I fancy your are not far out of the way there," he assented.

"And as for the rest," she continued, vehemently, "is it nothing that I have given you my all in return for a liking, a pitiful charitableness on your part?"

But this was going a little too far.

"Oh, yes, your all—your dear heart, into the bargain!" he made bold to retort.

"And who is responsible for its death—for my emotional womanliness in ashes!" She cried, fiercely. "But enough of this!" She controlled herself, and laid her hand on the door. "Perhaps," icily, "you had better return to your room. There might possibly be *danger* in the adventure I shall undertake alone."

She passed quickly and silently out, descending, as before, by the servants' stair, and out by the small door.

Jack was after her in an instant.

"Do you think I would let you go alone?" he grumbled, half-resentfully.

But just below the first terrace he laid his hand on her arm, drawing her into the shadow of the great ornamental fountain which was the chief feature of the grounds there.

"Wait, my darling!" he whispered. "I have a premonition of ill."

The idea of Jack having a premonition of anything! She looked at him with mock inquiry.

"Wouldn't it be wiser to first be sure that the governor is in bed and asleep?" he went on, yet more impressively. "I don't know why it is, but I feel an unaccountable presentiment that he, or Mrs. Marjoram, or both, might be on the watch to play us some trick."

"Preposterous!" she exclaimed, with a hasty contemptuousness which she subsequently had reason to repent at leisure. "Where would either of them be if not in bed and asleep?"

"I don't know." And Jack scratched his thick head with a foolish look.

"Come along, then."

He made no further demur, though had he suggested the possibility of Lord Brandymere, in lieu of the others, being on the alert, her apprehensions might have proved somewhat more sympathetic.

It was now past midnight, and the mistiness had cleared, causing the flooding moonlight to weave its broad and refulgent path across the bosom of the spacious and noble stream as they approached the old night-ferryman's solitary

cabin by an easy route leading along under the brow of the lawn and thence out over the railroad tracks.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE NIGHT-FERRY.

"LONG PETERS" had long been a familiar and eccentric character of the river shore between Tarrytown and Irvington.

Thin, gaunt and tall of person, a reticent and somewhat morose recluse, a fisherman by day, a ferryman on demand by night, he had plied his calling at the little embowered cabin and boat-house just north of Lovers' Seat Rock almost from a time out of mind, and was generally regarded as an inveterate but honest and somewhat useful crank.

Both Avice and Jack paused involuntarily before knocking at the ferryman's door, and turned their gaze toward the lofty cliff-face which had been the scene of the recent tragedy.

"Poor Rod!" muttered Jack, hurrying away with a shudder. "How often we gamboled about here in the old days! There were always such quantities of crayfish and mussels along the outcropping rocks there just under the cliff's base, while the tomcods and rock-bass scarcely ever missed biting bravely, even at cricket and grasshopper baits, out yonder by the black reef. And now to think—" His voice choked a little and he stamped his foot, for Jack was not without a certain kindness of heart—such as it was.

Without deigning a reply, Avice knocked sharply at the door with a pebble, which she picked up for the purpose.

The summons had to be repeated several times before a harsh voice responded from within.

"It is us from Craggsby, Mr. Peters!" Avice called out, in her clear, sweet voice, at the same time mentioning her name and Jack's. "We wish to cross the river, and you shall be well paid if you make but little delay."

"Coming, coming, miss!" was the reply, in a somewhat more agreeable tone. "A little patience, please."

The door presently opened, and a man of tall, attenuated figure, though unbent by his great age as indicated by his snow-white hair, made his slouching appearance, with the greater part of his face concealed by white bandages, covered in their turn by the folds of a huge, not over-clean bandana handkerchief, which was knotted over the top of his head, whence the superfluous ends stuck out on either side with comical or pathetic grotesqueness, according to the mood of the observer.

"Dear me, Mr. Peters!" exclaimed Avice, sympathetically; "what is the matter with you?"

"A matter of face-ache, miss," was the grumbled reply, and reaching gropingly into the cabin behind him, the old ferryman produced and clapped on a dilapidated slouched hat in harmonious keeping with his general aspect. "Newralgy, I believe the doctors calls it; but these pesky fogs we've been havin' is bad enough for anything."

"Yes, but I never thought anything could affect you."

"Neither did I," interposed Jack. "But then none of us are getting any younger, as the old fellow with his scythe passes among us, are we, Peters?"

The ferryman was evidently little inclined to enter upon the details of his ailments, real or imaginary, or for talk in general.

He made an inarticulate reply, secured the door behind him, and then slouchingly led the way through his boat-house, where he obtained a pair of sculls, and out upon a float, where two stanch-looking row-boats were moored.

"You want to cross to the Head, you two?" he gruffly asked.

"That's what we are here for," Jack replied, with some sharpness, for the old fellow had not always been quite so surly in the earlier days, though, to be sure, the "newralgy" was a stranger to him then.

"All right; here you be!" easing the best-looking boat's gunwale up against the float.

They were speedily aboard and under way.

Once well out from the promontory, the current to be slantingly rowed against was sweepingly powerful, but the old boatman uncompromisingly bent to his work with a skill and vigor that were sufficiently reassuring, though the progress made was necessarily slow.

At last, Avice looked at her watch impatiently.

"Pshaw!" she exclaimed. "We'll be all of three hours getting over at this rate."

"Kin I help it, ma'm?" suddenly sputtered out the ferryman, in his hoarse, mumbling voice. "Kin I make the river run up instid of down, or paint the skiff's keel with wagon-grease, or rig up a screw-purpeller an' paddle-wheels fur yer, or bu'st a ham-string with pullin' more'n I be at the present minute, I'd like to know?"

Jack was about to reply with no little anger, when Avice checked him with a warning look, and he remembered that, if the secrecy of the old fellow was to be bargained for, it would be well to keep on the pleasantest side of him at any cost.

"Oh, but you want to know too much, Mr. Peters!" replied the young woman, with a

merry and polite laugh. "You mustn't think we are expecting impossibilities of you, my friend, even if we are naturally somewhat impatient."

"All right, miss," with a mollified air. "It ain't fur me to be downright pesky, especial with them as I've knowed in their boyhood's an' galhood's smiling hour. Besides that, the newralgy ain't no great shakes in polishin' up a feller's temper."

Avice took advantage of the promising change in his humor to fall into a condescending chat with regard to the "smilin' hour" in question; and if the ferryman was not exactly affable in his replies, there was sufficient evidence of his relaxing his testiness to a considerable degree.

"Don't you wonder, Mr. Peters," she said at last, "what can be taking us over the river at this unconscionable hour?"

"One man's or woman's secret ain't no business of no other man, nor woman nuther, miss," the ferryman managed to grunt out in reply, with no little sententiousness and much less syntax. "I kin wonder, yes, miss, but I kin take it out in wonderin'."

"We are glad that such are your principles," she continued, smiling. "My cousin and I, you see, are desirous of keeping this little expedition of ours a secret."

"Yes, ma'm; right you are, ma'm."

"How?" in some surprise.

"I mean ter say, ma'm," was the mumbled response, with just a shade of rough embarrassment, "or I should remark, ma'm, as how you've come to the right shop to hev it so kept when you've come to me."

"Oh!"

"Yes, miss," more easily. "It ain't your purty eyes, what I've knowed from galhood, nor Mister Jack's nuther, what I'd make troubled by givin' anything away as might be inconvenient, miss."

"Thank you, Mr. Peters; that will suit us capitally. Be faithful, and when you row us back again—say before six this morning—we shall pay you handsomely."

The old fellow's eyes seemed to sparkle avaciously.

"How much, ma'm," he cried, eagerly, "may I ventur' to ax might you call 'handsome'?"

She laughed again, while Jack looked bored.

"Ten dollars."

"Whoop!" almost 'catching a crab' in his enthusiasm. "Ten dollars? But you can't mean it?"

She seriously nodded.

"Count on me, miss, till—till you can't count on me no longer!" with a long breath.

She did not think it worth while to criticise the equivocalness of his uncouth response.

After this the old fellow bent to his oars for a long time in silence, though seemingly with redoubled zeal by reason of the liberal encouragement offered.

Finally, the breadth of the strong mid-current being mastered, the boat began to shoot rapidly in toward the stiller waters of the broad cove to the south of Nyack Head.

The moon was by this time near her setting, and the heavy darkness that preceded the first gray of dawn was slowly settling down over the waters, shadow over shadow, gloom upon gloom, over which, however, the stars were gradually thronging it with an added brightness on the threshold of their farewell to the parting obscurity.

"By the way, Mr. Peters," Avice at this juncture spoke out, "how can we best reach the Upper Hardscrabble Road from the landing?"

"It's called Cliffside Avynoo now-a-days," replied the ferryman, with conservative scorn. "You go straight up by the landin' footpath, miss, an' it's the second road you come to."

"Thanks! Do you chance to know of a Mrs. Glassman on that road?"

"Yes, ma'm; a fine woman, if she is a widder, so I'm told. Second house up the road from the path crossing. Mind out till I git her well moored in, for here we be at last."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

"IN A COIGN OF THE CLIFF."

THE landing was at the foot of a steep bank, and a very secluded spot, with not a house in sight by the uncertain light that now prevailed.

Decidedly unique ideas of fidelity had this same eccentric ferryman, it must be confessed.

After receiving an impressive parting injunction from his passengers to the effect that he should patiently await their return, however long absent they might chance to be, and solemnly grunting out a compliance, he did wait patiently indeed, but only long enough to be assured that they were well on their way up the steep and wooded footpath he had indicated.

Then, with a low chuckle, he quietly headed about, took a back course, and, silently shooting out upon the dark river with long, powerful strokes, in comparison with which his best previous efforts seemed somehow to have been a mere toying with the oars, was speedily swallowed up in the obscurity.

As for our pair of intriguing adventurers, they at last reached the road indicated as the Upper Hardscrabble, after a toilsome tramp up the wooded hill-path, and just as the air was

growing visibly lighter in the influence of the early dawn, with the twitterings of the newly-awakened birds desultorily audible from amid the surrounding trees and hedge-rows.

An old-time lonely hillside road in the first stages of transformation into an outlying suburban street of the neighboring village corporation, with an isolated villa or two here and there, and an occasional farm-house at yet wider intervals, but for the most part still retaining the greater part of its pristine picturesqueness intact.

"That must be the house," said Avice, pointing to a comfortable looking but unpretentious domicile in the midst of a terraced garden, sloping so steeply down toward the river as to suggest Swinburne's rare description in his "Crag-side Home," beginning with the line—

"In a coign of the cliff, o'er the throb of the sea,"

and with large, bright-tinted *jalousies* looking out over a charming little front *parterre* through a screen of honeysuckle vines and syringas. "Let us investigate."

They entered the gate, and read on the bronze plate under the old-fashioned door-knocker the name—

"Mrs. Glassman."

"Jack," and Avice turned to her companion with her touch upon the knocker, "you will naturally prefer that I should make the first advances, perhaps?"

He was already pale, and in an agony of nervous perspiration.

"Well, rather!" he stammered, with a weak attempt at a smile.

"Go down back, then, to that terrace fountain that we have noticed. There is an ever-green clump where you can doubtless be free from observation for the time being, and I will endeavor to bring Bertha there."

He was about starting away with somewhat comical precipitation when her low voice arrested him.

"Wait! A thought occurs to me, and I must caution you."

"What is it?" impatiently.

"On no account must Rod Marjoram's death be mentioned, though we needn't be so particular as to young Baylis. She'll find it out soon enough, and—"

"Good God!" interrupted Jack, irritably; "don't imagine but that I'll be as dumb as a fish. It's bad enough to face alone!" And he incontinently fled.

On her own part, it was not with the completest equanimity that Avice Hollister, bold and self-poised as she might be, found herself thus on the brink of coming face to face with the young woman whom she had so ruthlessly wronged.

Reckless and unscrupulous as she might have become, she was still none the less a woman, with the lingering traditions of good breeding and delicate instincts behind her.

Still, it was more than likely that the first summons would be responded to by a servant, or perhaps the proprietress herself, as an intermediary buffer, so to speak, which would be better than no preparation at all.

She accordingly collected herself thoroughly, and caused the knocker to give forth a clear, distinct summons.

To her astonishment, for it was not yet four o'clock, with the gloaming as yet but at half-light, it was answered almost instantly.

"Wait, please!" called out a soft voice from within, accompanied first by advancing steps, and then by the drawing of a bolt.

Then the door was opened, and Avice Hollister was unexpectedly confronted by Bertha Forrest herself.

She had not taken into account the latter's predilection for early morning strolls, upon one of which she had evidently just been on the point of starting out, for she was fully attired for out-doors exercise.

Bertha turned very pale at first.

"You here?" she falteringly ejaculated.

Then she seemed to recover her composure promptly, a fine look of haughty and contemptuous scorn coming into her ordinarily meek face and mild eyes, which would have done credit to Avice herself at her haughtiest, and she retreated a step into the doorway, with a coldly inquiring bow.

As for Avice, she was certainly quite the reverse from being at her haughtiest at this moment; indeed, she looked, as she doubtless felt, and perhaps for the first time in her life, completely humbled and confused, though she quickly began to rally.

"Bertha—Miss Forrest," she began, hurriedly, "you naturally wonder at seeing me here. But, it is to amend the past, if that shall be possible—to repair as far as I can the grievous wrong I have unconsciously done you!"

A smile of mingled incredulity and contempt curled the pale lips of the poorer girl.

"I have never doubted your hardihood, Miss Hollister," she replied, with quiet disdain. "Now I am sure of it."

"Why hardihood, allow me to ask?"

Avice was getting herself more thoroughly in hand by this time, though she was intent on

preserving a certain humbleness of role if it should remain in her power.

"You speak of the wrong you have *unconsciously* done me?" suggested Miss Forrest.

"Yes, surely."

"This is too absolutely pretentious!" with a scornful little laugh.

"Pardon my obliquity," in a surprised way, "but, in what way?"

"Are you unaware of certain confidences, as to your foul plottings against me, that Mr. Baylis and Mr. Marjoram have reposed in me, Miss Hollister, or do you take me for a natural-born fool?"

"I do not understand you."

"Oh, you do not!"

"Miss Forrest," after a well affected fluttering, "I entreat your forbearance! Is there not a place where we can converse with less likelihood of being disturbed than just here? Back yonder in the garden, which struck me as agreeable and secluded, for instance."

Miss Forrest hesitated, and then shrugged her pretty shoulders significantly; in fact, the other had hardly supposed her capable of so much quiet and effective antagonism.

"How am I to know," she asked, sarcastically, "that you do not want to have me abducted over again?"

Avice proved herself a clever actress in this species of diplomacy that was so new to her, especially with one of her own sex and in the unwontedly meek role she was assuming. She colored so painfully, and looked so thoroughly mortified and crushed that Bertha, in spite of her smarting wrongs, was almost tempted to pity her.

"I have brought some one with me," Miss Hollister said. "I admit that much ground for your unjust suspicion. He is back there in the garden now, though I doubt if he will have the assurance to face you. I wouldn't if I were he. It is my cousin, Mr. Sterling."

If there was anything new in the cold contemptuousness of Miss Forrest's face, as evoked by this announcement, it was simply surprise. Then there was nothing but indifference, for all the eagerness with which Avice covertly searched it for a betrayal of something else.

The latter's jealousy might safely be at rest thereafter, there was no doubt of that.

"What you tell me is somewhat surprising, I must confess," observed Miss Forrest, slowly. "However," smiling composedly, "since Mr. Sterling is a gentleman whom I once honored with my acquaintance, I think I may risk going with you, Miss Hollister. Come, then."

She closed the door decisively behind her, crossed the porch, and herself led the way around and down into the garden, now an ordered wilderness of dew-bathed beauties, aglow with the first roseate beams of the rising day.

As if by a sort of indifferent instinct, she went straight to the terrace fountain, where a rustic seat was bestowed conveniently, though Jack himself, having quickly taken the alarm, was nowhere visible.

Here she coolly signed her visitor to be seated, sunk herself into the extreme other corner of the bench, and then calmly waited.

They were partly with their backs to the magnificent river view, and facing the fountain, girt by prettily arranged flower-beds, and in whose round marble basin, with a small jet of water spouting in the center, some gold fish lazily swam.

While herself waiting, in the hope that her companion would afford a fresh opening by being the first to speak, Avice observed her intently, and with secret rage.

Bertha Forrest, besides possessing many decided attractions of person by natural gift, duly refined and elegantized, if we may coin the word, by an early delicacy of breeding which no amount of subsequent suffering and hard living had sufficed to cheapen or deteriorate, was one of those undemonstratively strong, self-contained individualities that rather brighten in point of their externals under adverse circumstances, such as commonly cause more specious but intrinsically inferior natures to betray the painfulness of the ordeal in the haggard cheek, the dimmed eye and similar saddening manifestations. In fewer words, she was strong and brave from within, not from without. She had the moral courage, the divine philosophy, that is an attribute not of the intellect, or of the understanding, but of the soul.

Thus the period of her recent sufferings, though comparatively brief of duration, had improved her vastly no less in the moral than in the physical sense. She was robust and yet more graceful, her soft eye no longer bore the wearied look from her long hours of enforced needlework, but was brighter and clearer, her complexion was pure as Avice's own, her face fuller, her expression at once gentler and more assured—in a word, she was far younger, prettier and more attractive looking than the fortnight previous when her enemy's calumny and wrong had so strongly laid their clutch on her young life.

As Bertha manifested no disposition to open the conversation afresh, Avice put her hand before her eyes, and seemed to become the prey of a steadily increasing agitation.

At last, to Bertha's unqualified astonishment she suddenly threw herself at her feet in a passion of tempestuous tears.

"Bertha—Miss Forrest—forgive me!" she sobbed. "I know I have treated you abominably, but—but it was really not so bad as it looks against me. I solemnly aver that it was not! And I am here to save you, Bertha—by my soul, I am, and for nothing else!"

Bertha was fairly amazed. With no knowledge of Avice's expertness in master-duplicity, this emotional violence was so contrary to what she had always surmised as to the powerful self-reliant, if at times ill-governed, character of the young woman that she could not, at least for the time being, stigmatize it as mere cunning.

"In Heaven's name, what is the matter with you, Miss Hollister?" she exclaimed, more than half-frightened. "Let that go for the present, if you choose, about your having treated me shamefully—and I simply *know* too much to ever believe to the contrary—but, what do you mean by this other wild talk?"

"Oh, it is the truth!" still weeping bitterly.

"On my soul, it is!"

"But, compose yourself. What is the truth?—that you are here to save me?"

"Yes, yes!"

"But to save me from what?"

"From—from—heavens, that I should say it of one I love and respect so much!—from my uncle!"

"From Mr. Hollister?" in renewed amazement.

"Yes, yes!"

"But, this is preposterous!"

"No, no; indeed it is not! You cannot understand."

"Understand what?"

"How he hates you—the bitterness of the prejudice he has conceived against you! You must fly—I am here to provide you with the means; otherwise he will pursue you with insane hatred; he will remorselessly hunt you down!"

Bertha was at first half-disposed to laugh this fable to derision; and then she was fairly bewildered.

Now the detective, while informing her thoroughly as to the extent of Miss Hollister's duplicity, had always, while avoiding any direct allusion to Mr. Hollister's predilection for herself, together with making a secret of his intention of bringing them together, given her to understand that the old gentleman was to a certain degree her champion.

How, then, was it possible to believe this extraordinary statement as to his virulent hostility, and how disbelieve it without giving the lie to this strange emotional vehemence on Miss Hollister's part as nothing more than so much hypocrisy, which she could not find it in her heart or judgment to do, much as she had reason to distrust her?

To describe the various phases of consummate acting, falsehood and sophistry by which this bewilderment was increased to that degree that the poor girl was finally induced to at least half-believe as true that which, under cooler, less bedeviled examination, should have shown the contrary on its very face, would occupy more space than is at the writer's disposal.

Suffice it to say that, incredible as it may seem, this was actually done.

More than this, effect was added to the delusion by communicating the fact of young Baylis's death with a cunning exaggeration of pathos and horribleness in the narration such as were specially devised to shock the young woman's susceptible and sensitive organization to the core; while she was even made to believe, or half believe, that even Joram, the detective, had at last abandoned her cause, and fled to parts unknown at Mr. Hollister's furious instance, or from fear of his threats of vengeance in the event of a continuance of her championship.

"Oh, how can I believe so much wickedness?" moaned Miss Forrest, completely unnerved at last.

"You must do so, my poor child," cried Avice, earnestly. "Jack Sterling will tell you the same thing. Will you believe him, if he fully corroborates what I have declared?"

"Yes," was the desperate reply.

"Cousin Jack, where are you?" Avice called forth, with difficulty dissembling her joy.

"Why have you not shown yourself before?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A DESPERATE GAME.

JACK came skulking out from among the ever-greens, in obedience to his fair confederate's summons, cutting a decidedly unenviable figure.

He had overheard all, and at first, before he could venture to meet Bertha Forrest's eyes, he, indeed, had very much the appearance of a whipped spaniel.

But, at last, when he did meet them, what he saw there—absolutely nothing but complete personal indifference, together with a simple piteous appeal to what she could still believe of his gentlemanliness and manhood for the truth in this vexed and difficult pass—caused him to pick up heart, if, indeed, it did not also occasion him a sense of wounded vanity and cheap resentment.

"Speak, Jack!" cried Avice, still more or less

tearful and vehement; "you have heard what I have been so earnestly endeavoring to impress upon Miss Forrest as to Uncle Hal's insane hostility to her, and the necessity of her flying to Los Angeles with my secret assistance as precipitately as may be?"

"Yes," he replied, in a low voice. "I couldn't help overhearing, though it wasn't a very enviable position for me."

"Never mind that. Speak!" and there was a covert warning, almost a threat, in her tone; "have I represented the truth, and nothing but the truth, in every particular, or have I not?"

The miserable young man hesitated. It was a bitter demand upon one with the last lingering relics of manliness in his composition, if he possessed as much. But, in opposition to the agony of suspense bent upon him from Bertha's verdict-waiting eyes, there was in addition to the mute menace in Avic's counter-gaze, the grinning phantom of Uncle Hal's prospective millions' good-by; and, moreover, besides having a coward heart, he was full of contemptible pique over his fair-seeming unworthiness having been so completely effaced out of the noble bosom he had so contemptibly wronged.

"It is true," he at last replied, quite composedly, "every word of it!"

Bertha turned yet paler.

"Thank you, then, Miss Hollister," she said, in a low, trembling voice. "I shall consent to hide myself out in California, according to your offer. And perhaps the sooner I start the better for me."

"Indeed, yes!" exclaimed Avic, seeming to fairly beam with her disinterestedness. "I shall remain by you until you are fairly off, my friend. Will it take you long to pack up, and close your arrangements with the lady of this house?"

"No, no; less than half an hour, I think."

"Let me accompany you to the house, then. Jack, you can go down to the village for an expressman, and to find out about the trains. I have an impression that one starts at six o'clock. Bertha, I have six hundred dollars with me that you must accept as your first incidentals."

"Six hundred dollars!" stammered Bertha.

"Yes," indifferently. "It was all that I could raise in haste. But, of course, I can arrange to send you plenty more from time to time. Good heavens!" with swimming eyes; "isn't that little enough in the way of amends for the injury I have wrought you? Do not delay, Jack!" she called after him, for he had already started away. "It is past five now, and if by any chance Uncle Hal should miss us from Craggsby!"

"Trust in me," he replied, disappearing.

Avic then accompanied Bertha back to the house, where Mrs. Glassman was aroused and made acquainted with the state of the emergency, while a hasty breakfast was got in readiness as the preparations were being expedited.

She was a good sort of woman who had already taken a strange interest in her hunted and all-but friendless young boarder, than whom there was none other. But she was also very timid, and she was at once almost as nervous as Bertha herself in speeding the latter's departure.

"It seems just incredible that you should be so hunted and have such a powerful, unscrupulous enemy, my poor child!" she exclaimed. "But, you will surely be safer out in California, and I learn that there are excellent opportunities there, too."

At last the trunk was packed and out upon the porch, the hurried breakfast had been eaten or trifled with by the fugitive, and they were all, including Mrs. Glassman's servant girl, standing by the road gate, anxiously and impatiently awaiting Jack's return with the expressman.

Avic was so full of exultant joy that she could scarcely contain herself. She had played a desperate game, but the winning cards were indubitably in her hand at last, to all appearances, and both Jack and her uncle's millions were secure.

If she forgot in the excitement and triumph of the moment that in such a game the sweepstakes are as often, by a beneficent dispensation, to the innocent dupe as to the expert trickster, it was perhaps no more than could be expected.

At last a wagon, with Jack beside the driver, was seen hurrying up the steep road.

"Thank Heaven, for your sake!" cried Avic, clasping Bertha's trembling hands. "You are safe, or almost safe, at last. Of course, I will accompany you to the station."

"It is all right!" cried Jack, alighting at the gate. "There is a train at six-five, which connects with a through overland at Jersey City. That is the trunk, I suppose?"

"Yes."

The trunk was already in the wagon, and Bertha was shaking hands with good Mrs. Glassman for the last time before setting out to walk to the station, half a mile away, when Jack, upon turning to Avic, was struck by an appalling change in the latter's demeanor.

She was leaning against the gate, ghastly pale, her eyes looking down the road, wide open and with a despairing look.

"For God's sake!" he exclaimed, in a low voice; "what is the matter?"

"Lost—baffled—ruined!" was all she could gasp in reply, while pointing with her hand. "Look!"

He did so, and was no less appalled.

At the same time, Bertha uttered a strange, bewildered cry.

CHAPTER XXXV. SWEEPSTAKES.

THREE persons had just emerged into the road from the steep river cross-path, and were advancing toward the gate, under the escort of the lanky and eccentric individual who had ferried the conspirators across the stream!

They were Mr. Hollister himself, Lord Brandymere and Mrs. Marjoram.

The former was the first to perceive the party at the gate, and, with a glance that seemed to take in the entire significance of the situation on the instant.

He ran forward nimbly, fairly Gorgonizing both Avic and Jack with a sufficiently furious and contemptuous look, and then seized Bertha by both her hands before she could turn to flee, as indeed she seemed on the point of doing.

"You poor persecuted child!" was all he could exclaim at first.

"I—I don't understand, sir!" stammered the bewildered girl, looking up into the benevolent and joyful face. "You—you are not pursuing me then with your hatred? And—and I mustn't fly from your vengeance, I suppose?"

"Good heavens!" cried the astounded old gentleman. "Hatred—vengeance! Why, my dear girl," blurted out, yet heroically, "I—I positively adore you! That is, I want to and hope to, you must know, if you will only let me."

All this was quite new and strange to the young woman, though she was by this time coming out of her first bewilderment.

"And you would have fled?" exclaimed Mr. Hollister.

"Yes, sir—to California."

"Heavens and earth! what could have put that into your head?"

"Well, I was made to understand by Miss Hollister and Mr. Sterling that you were implacable in your resentment against me, and as Miss Hollister was to furnish me with the necessary funds—"

He silenced her with a gesture, and then turned upon the defeated conspirators with a grief-stricken, menacing gaze that showed how thoroughly he understood.

"Go!" he thundered. "I may talk your villainy over with you in a cooler moment, but not now."

Jack slunk back doggedly, but Avic, though still white, was already accepting her defeat with her accustomed hardihood.

The game was lost, the sweepstakes in the hands of her dupe, but the latter should not see her cringe or quail.

But most of all was her immediate resentment centered upon the treacherous ferryman.

"Do not imagine, Mr. Long Peters," she exclaimed, going straight up to him, "but that you shall one day be paid back for this trick!"

"Hold on, ma'm!" cried the other, in a hearty and changed voice. "Be sure you are talking to Long Peters before you menace him so savagely."

With that, he tore off his white wig and face-bandages, to the revelation of Three-fingered Joram, the Detective Expert himself, surprisingly alive and healthy and in the best of humor.

"My dear Miss Hollister," cried the transformed, "you are doubtless convinced of the fact that I am pretty hard to kill. But, do not be alarmed. It was an accident by which I was toppled over the face of Lover's Seat Rock, and," with a meaning look, while lowering his voice so as to be audible to her alone, "if it was no fault of yours that the powder with which you so charitably attempted to poison me was comparatively harmless, none shall be the wiser so far as I am concerned—if you behave yourself in the future."

She had already recovered from the first shock of the revelation, and she bowed her head submissively.

Then she was advancing toward Jack, when the latter repulsed her with a rude gesture.

"Oh, have done!" he growled, peevishly. "But for your infernal suggestions, I wouldn't be in this beastly ruinous hole, now!" And, thrusting his hands in his pockets, he strode off down the road.

Before Avic could quite recover from the brutality of this rebuff, Lord Brandymere stepped forward with a sort of exultant courtliness, as it might be called.

"I trust," he said, raising his hat and extending a hand, "that Miss Hollister will not forget that my name, fortune and services are wholly at her command."

She collected herself sufficiently to give a musical little accepting laugh and look at him archly.

"Do conduct me to the Nyack ferry-landing, Lord Brandymere," she said, placing her hand in his.

"With all my heart!" replied the Englishman, sturdily. "And, there's never a water so broad and deep between now and doomsday,

my dear, but what I shall cheerfully ferry you over it." And he quietly bore her away.

"Mrs. Marjoram," said Mr. Hollister, rubbing his hands with completely restored good-humor, "pray give that expressman the necessary change of directions respecting the trunk. As a matter of course, Miss Forrest will return with us to Craggsby as your special guest."

The housekeeper complied, and then, clasping her hands, she turned an admiring and adoring look upon her nephew.

"Such a plot and such an unraveling!" she murmured, ecstatically, as Rod laughingly embraced her; "and all through my neevy, the detective!"

Our story is brought to a close.

Avic and Jack were forgiven in part, but on such humiliating terms as to constitute an ample punishment for what they so richly deserved for their turpitude.

The unfortunate Maggy McMann was, of course, released, and Mr. Hollister cheerfully paid her a snug sum as the price for her secrecy as to the real culprit for whose misdeeds she had briefly been made the scapegrace.

Good Mr. Hollister's wooing o't sped so successfully that Bertha Forrest was duly taken to him as his beloved second wife by the ensuing October, the month that had been fixed for the ill-starred marriage of Avic and Jack, which was never to be. The union has been a singularly felicitous one, notwithstanding the wide disparity in the matter of age; a vigorous male heir has been born to them, and they are still living alternately at the New York mansion and Craggsby, as happy and contented a couple as can be found anywhere, Mrs. Marjoram continuing with them in her privileged capacity of trusty friend and faultless housekeeper.

Irony of destiny! Avic Hollister was chief bridesmaid at the wedding! However, she had the intellectual stamina to come out of the ordeal smiling, which is saying a good deal for a young lady with a defunct heart; and she had a better compensation than she deserved in a subsequent wedding of her own. She was married to Lord Brandymere on the following Christmas Day, and immediately thereafter set out with him for his English estates, whence neither of them has since returned to this country. Whether or not she has made his lordship a model wife, is not known; but, it is certain that he is very proud of her, as being by general verdict the most regally beautiful woman in all England, professional beauties not excluded—and most probably to the increased standing mortification of the British matron, *et. al.*, over the artful success of the American girl in the abstract as a too frequent prize-drawer in the titled husband mart of that rich and tight little isle; while, from what we have seen of the rather brutal frankness and resoluteness of his phlegmatic lordship's character, the inference is moreover pretty fair that, by the exercise of certain heroic methods, he may likewise have molded the wayward beauty, heart or no heart, into such a companion for his stately domesticity as would be after his own ideas.

"Something better than his dog, a little dearer than his horse"—or perhaps not quite so bad as that either, in the double consideration of the lady's talent and his lordship's worship of the magnificently beautiful in femininity—after his fashion.

As for poor paltry Jack, even his fate has been better than he deserved. In addition to his salary as bank clerk, his wealthy kinsman allows him two thousand dollars a year. This enables the young man to turn his leisure attention to sporting events in a limited degree; and in default of the hoarded millions which he had so fondly hoped to wallow in, he is content with the highly laudable ambition of becoming a recognized minor authority on theatricals, base-ball, pedestrianism and the fistic art. At last accounts he had made yet another stride toward contentment by marrying a Lexington avenue boarding-house mistress of a trifle more than his own age, and it is to be hoped that he is finally fixed in the worldly and emotional sense. At all events, having found his true sphere, he will do well to remain scrupulously therein. Such men as Jack Sterling are not particularly nor vitally necessary in the world's well being, and, once out of their true orbits, are not apt to last long as careering luminaries.

In addition to the happy consciousness of virtue as its own reward, our Detective Expert friend received a most substantial recognition of his meritorious services at the hands of Mr. Hollister, and is still making good reputation for both modest worth and pronounced ability in his profession. He may be heard from again.

THE END.

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